

5 WESTERN
NOVELS *Magazine*

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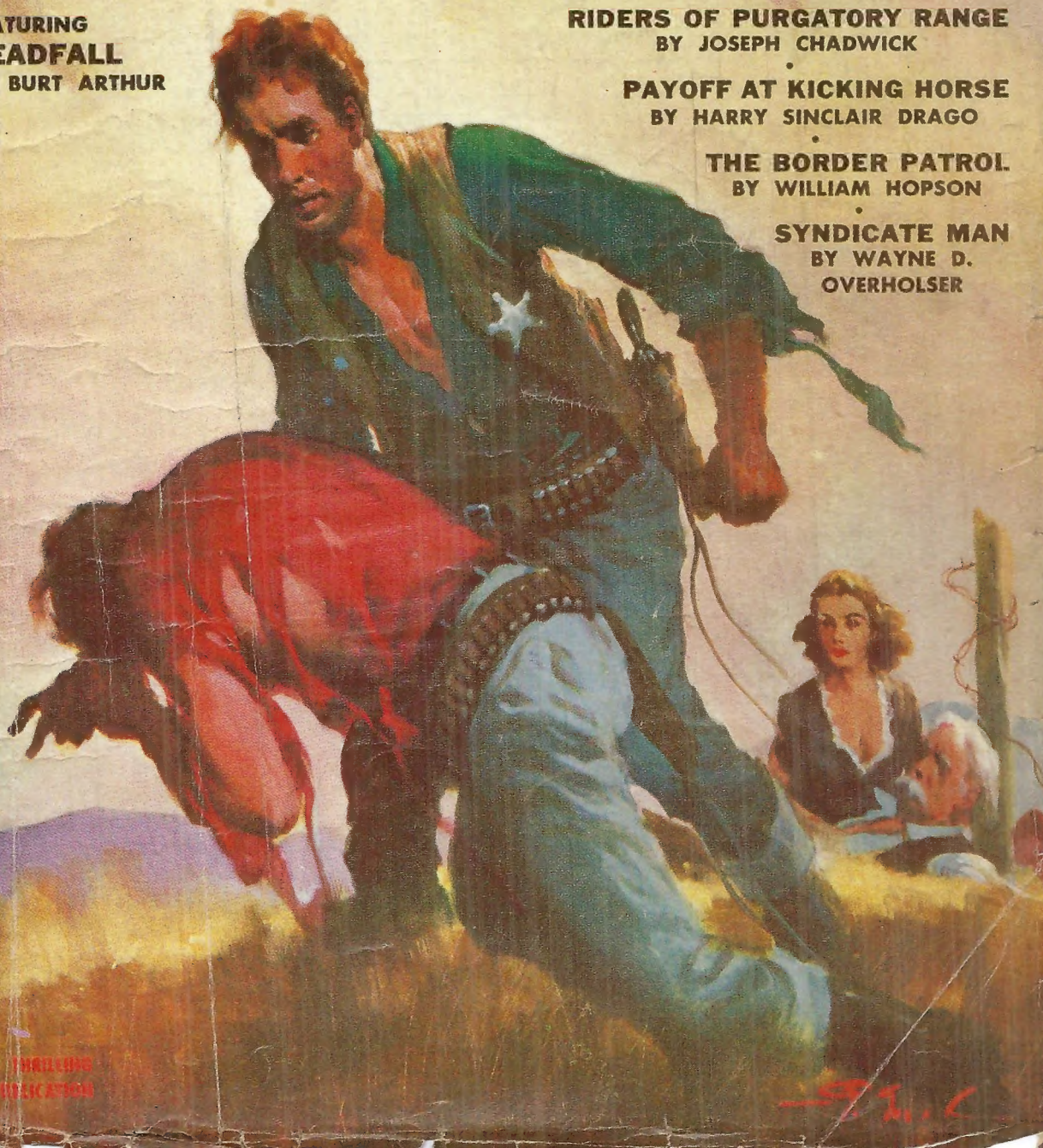
FEATURING
DEADFALL
BY BURT ARTHUR

RIDERS OF PURGATORY RANGE
BY JOSEPH CHADWICK

PAYOFF AT KICKING HORSE
BY HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

THE BORDER PATROL
BY WILLIAM HOPSON

SYNDICATE MAN
BY WAYNE D.
OVERHOLSER

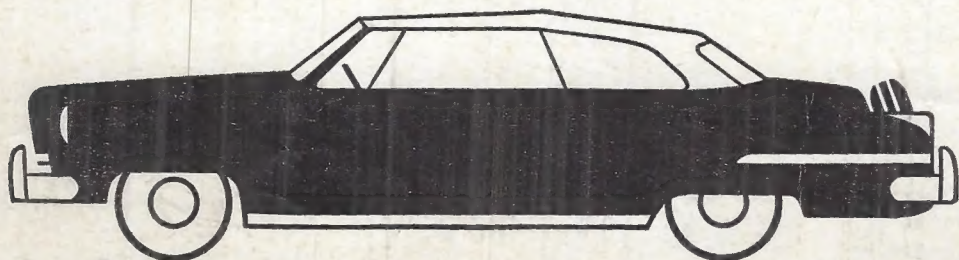


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5 WESTERN NOVELS

Magazine

Vol. 8, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

September, 1953

DEADFALL

Frank McGraw, drifter, pulled in his reins when he came on a sick rancher with a wife who was too beautiful to be good

BURT ARTHUR 10

SYNDICATE MAN

They said he was killer, a man without soul or conscience—but only Dan Neally knew how wrong they were in saying such

WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER 40

PAYOFF AT KICKING HORSE

For over half a century the Porters and Skenes had been at each other's throats, until a broken dam ended the feuding

HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO 66

RIDERS OF PURGATORY RANGE

Young Jeb Macklin had a lot to learn—but he learned plenty fast when the Texans came to Mormon country with longhorns

JOSEPH CHADWICK 81

THE BORDER PATROL

The Border smugglers were a law unto themselves, until Tim Powers took matters into his own hands by playing hunches

WILLIAM HOPSON 97

THE PACK SADDLE (Department)

Warren Kuhn 6

THE WAY OF THE WEST

Harold Helfer 9

THE INDIAN SIGN

Doris E. Pogue 35

WHAT A PLIGHT (Verse)

Pecos Pete 49

THE WEST'S MOST UNUSUAL BANDIT

Robert Franklin Ames 105

LICK FOR THE RED MAN

Roy Holt 112

SHERIFF WANTED (Short Story)

Robert Virgil 113

SNOW IN THE CANYON (A Western Classic)

Ernest Haycox 118

MORRIS OGDEN JONES, Editor

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THE LITTLE BROTHERS OF BUFFALO BOOTH

By WARREN KUHN

IT WAS the lead mule that gave warning. A muffled snort and the Kiowa brave was on him, scalping knife ripping down. Bill Booth lunged sideways, the blade slicing his shirt from neck to elbow, his bony hands still full of the buffalo chips he'd been gathering for his cookfire.

He hit the ground hard, twisting, but his back had hit first and his skinning knife, hung in its sheath by the groove of his spine, was under him and out of reach. His only weapons lay in his hands and he acted on instinct, flinging the caked mass full into the shadowy face above him.

The Indian grunted, the heavy clod smashing his nose. He gasped, spat dirt and then gasped again as Booth's own blade sliced up into the Kiowa's ribs. Yet even as the Indian crumpled, Booth had withdrawn the knife and was swinging up the rocky face of Pawnee Rock, but not before he had filled his shirt with a load of buffalo chips. The Kiowas had known he would be after fuel for a fire, but not even a Kiowa would have fought a death struggle and then gone back to an interrupted task with only a grunt for added speed.

Though Bill Booth, mountain man, had lived with Kiowa and Cheyenne long enough to think like them, it was a rare day when they could think ahead of him. Now, however, in this spring of 1836, it seemed like the Kiowas' chance had come. Bill and a partner, Jim Gibson, had been trapping beaver when a band of sixty Kiowas jumped them at Pawnee Rock on the Arkansas.

The two trappers managed to drive off the first wave of Indians and get safely to the Rock itself, which was a lofty mass of brown sandstone that overlooked the worn route of the old Santa Fe Trail. Its high, steep walls made it a natural fort.

The pair had plenty of powder and a pouch of bullets apiece, with a couple of jackrabbits for food. Luckily, too, they had been able to picket their pack mules on the Rock's west side where they could watch them.

Only when hour followed hour, powder and lead ran low and their stomachs ached for food. It was when Booth finally swung down to the prairie to gather chips for a fire that the Kiowa had narrowly missed getting him. After that, the two munched raw rabbit when their fuel supply ran out.

Twice the Kiowas tried savage charges that failed. Then, late in the evening, they fired the prairie grass. Booth barely had time to make a firebreak for the precious mules by pulling out the grass around them.

After fire had failed, the Kiowas tried a new version of an old trick. Tying their ponies together, they covered them with branches of trees they had cut on the nearby creek, packed lodge-skins on the branches and keeping behind this moving breastwork, drove the horses toward the Rock.

Reluctantly the two trappers aimed carefully and fired. Two ponies reared and fell. Soon the barricade was a melee of milling, tearing horses and running Kiowas. Wasting no powder, Booth and Gibson brought down two more braves.

At dawn the two were startled to see a warrior walk through the scorched grass, holding aloft a strip of white blanket.

"They want a palaver," Booth said. "But if they rush me, keep shootin', Jim!"

He swung down to find the Indians, who were led by O-ton-son-e-var—"Buffalo Herd"—a war chief of the Kiowas, willing to give them a chance for their lives.

"Buffalo Herd may speak with a twisted tongue," Booth answered slowly. "We have much powder, much lead on the Rock."

The brave withdrew to return with Buffalo Herd, the chief himself, a hawk-nosed regal man with a scarred chest.

"The Kiowas are not coyotes," the chief said. "They know brave men." He pointed to a solitary cottonwood on the banks of the Arkansas nearby, explaining that one of the two trappers would run the knife-gauntlet from the tree two hundred steps out toward the prairie. "If the one who runs escapes, both are free."

Deciding it was their only chance, the two took it. Gibson pushed forward, but Booth held him back. The chief eyed the younger man keenly. He had not forgotten that it was Booth who had killed so many of his warriors with his long rifle. Booth was well known along the Arkansas and the Powder for his marksmanship. This was the chance the Kiowas had hungered for and the remaining braves lined up, tense, their knives drawn and ready, grinning over the treat in store.

Booth kicked off his clothes, his arm smarting from the knife battle of the evening before. He rubbed his jaw and looked casually toward the distant mountains. Gibson saw the younger trapper's brow narrow as if he saw something and then as many Kiowa eyes followed Booth's gaze, Booth cut loose with a yell and started forward.

The startled braves saw he was well among them before they realized they had been tricked. They slashed with their knives but he twisted and dodged, smashing up against their arms to send their blades spinning again and again.

Near the end, a brave threw himself squarely in Booth's path, but Booth spying a broken pile of buffalo chips before him, dove and straightened in one quick movement. His hands flung the dusty pile into the warrior's eyes. Momentarily blinded, the brave groped for the elusive white man. Booth saw his chance. He smashed through the Indian's spraddled legs and sprang clear, fully twenty feet beyond the chief's limit.

Keeping his angry braves away, Buffalo Herd motioned toward the river with his arms. The two trappers were free. They scrambled for their mules, wasting no time, and put space between themselves and the sullen war party. That night as they camped, they could hear across the far distance the death song chanted by the Kiowas as they buried their dead under the scorched prairie.

Gibson was about to add a buffalo chip to their campfire when Booth stopped him. He took the chip, laid it tenderly aside on a smooth spot of ground.

"Even if I have to go hungry," Booth said with a grin, "we're through burning buffalo chips. After today, I feel like a brother to the dang little critturs!"

He Asked Permission to Stay



Major William E. Barber, USMC

EIGHT THOUSAND marines lay besieged at Yudam-ni; three thousand more were at Hagaru-ri, preparing a breakthrough. Guarding a frozen mountain pass between them, Major Barber, with only a company, held their fate in his hands. Encirclement threatened him. But he asked permission to stay, and for five days he held the pass against attack. When relief came, only eighty-four men could walk away. But Major Barber had saved a division.

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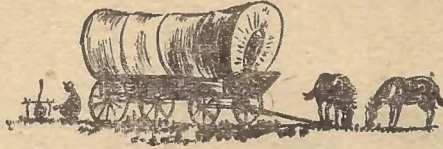
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The Way of the West



THE RIO GRANDE never again will be the big river it once was. That's the opinion of the Federal men along the Border who record the incessant rise and fall—mostly fall in recent years—of the boundary stream. Dams and reservoirs, it is explained, have been built along the river to such an extent that even a year of good rain upstream might not restore the normal level.

A STORY MAKING the rounds: A cowboy entered the doctor's office and asked for a checkup. After an examination, the physician said, "Well, son, you have a little lung trouble."

"Whaddya suggest?" the cowpoke asked.

"Can you arrange to sleep out of doors?" the medico asked.

"Wa-al," drawled the cowpuncher, "I been sleepin' under the old chuck wagon, but I reckon I could kick a couple spokes outa the wheels."

LONG BEFORE COLUMBUS discovered America Indians in the Southwest used cacao beans, from which chocolate is processed, for money.

TOBACCO-SMOKING ORIGINATED with the Indians of the western hemisphere, probably as early as 100 A.D.

AN ACRE OF MESQUITE costs a rancher 76 tons of water a year—or 32 gallons a day. This loss doesn't get much attention when there's a lot of water, but the grass that might have been provided by water sucked up by mesquite during the past three years of drought would add up high in the feeding plans of Texas ranchers. A range specialist estimates that more than 400 pounds of water per acre lost daily would produce a pound of buffalo grass daily.

AMONG SOME INDIANS a suitor works for his future father-in-law and, if the engagement is broken by the girl's parents, her father repays by working for the suitor.

JOE SAGE HEN, of Cow Island, Mont., scared up a giant 15½-pound jackrabbit and promptly blasted the critter with a buffalo gun. The Indian said it was the biggest rabbit ever shot in Montana.

ALTHOUGH U. S. TROOPS were used in an attempt to quell uprisings of the Seminole Indians in the 19th century, the Congress never formally declared war against them and thus a technical state of war with them has never existed. That is why you keep hearing that the Seminoles and the U. S. Government never signed a peace treaty. It wasn't necessary.

WE'RE USED TO THINKING of beef on the hoof as white-faced steers grazing on Western ranges, but the fastest-growing beef state is—of all places—Florida. Florida's beef cattle herd has more than doubled during the last decade, an increase 50 per cent greater than the rest of the nation. It now produces more beef than most of the Rocky Mountain cattle states.

BIRDS HAVE THE RIGHT of way in Utah. A sign along a road there says: "Slow down. Sage Grouse Crossing Highway."

EXPERIMENTS ON SOUTH DAKOTA ranches show that it is possible to take "nose-prints" of cattle for identification purposes, just as fingerprints are taken. FBI experts teamed with cattlemen to conduct the experiments. A system has been worked out for each sex of each breed, based on four basic noseprint patterns.

—Harold Helfer

*Frank McGraw, drifter, pulled in his reins when he found a
sick rancher with a wife who was too beautiful to be good*





A Novel by BURT ARTHUR

DEADFALL

I

HOOFs drummed in the road below the Bar L and the swelling beat, lifting and carrying in the brisk morning air, reached Sally Baird and brought her down the ladder from the hay loft and out to the doorway of the barn. She peered out, fixing her gaze on the upgrade that dipped down out of sight to meet the road. A stray strand of hair fluttered before her eyes, and she frowned and tucked it into place.

A horseman appeared and came up the incline.

He drew rein when he topped it and looked about him. When he spied Sally, he nudged his horse and came clattering barnward at a trot. He pulled up in front of the structure, touched the brim of his hat, slacked a little in the saddle, and met her appraising eyes.

"Morning, ma'am," he said politely. There was a week-old stubble on his face. "This the Len Baird place?"

"That's what the sign says, doesn't it?" she said.

"Sign?" he repeated, looking surprised. "You mean there's a sign somewheres down front and I missed it?"

"We-ll, it is a bit weatherbeaten and faded," she admitted, "so it isn't surprising that you rode past without noticing it."

He thumbed his hat up from his forehead. "Understand you're looking for an experienced hand," he said.

"That's right, we are."

"Then I'm your man," he said lightly.

"Where'd you work last?"

"In Texas. For the McCloy outfit."

"Why'd you leave?"

He rubbed his bristly chin with the back of a big, bronzed hand.

"For two reasons," he replied. "Got tired of the job and got fed up with the McCloys. Brothers they were, but always scrapping. When I found I had to take sides with one against the other, like I was a member of the family, I figured it was time to quit."

"Work anywhere else?"

"Sure. A dozen places. Couple of months here, maybe a year there, and so on. Never had the luck to hit a place I really liked. Gets kinda discouraging at times," he said a little wistfully. "But I don't let it get me down for long. I keep moving around and hoping."

"We're looking for someone who can run the place till my husband is well enough again to do it himself," she told him.

"Uh-huh. How long do you figure that'll be?"

"I don't know. It may be weeks, perhaps even months."

He swung down from his horse. He was long and lean. His shoulders were broad, but inclined to slope a bit. His clothes were worn and alkali flecked, his hat battered and his boots scuffed.

"I'm ready, ma'am," he announced.

"Aren't you interested in what we'll pay?" she asked. "Or doesn't money mean anything to you?"

"I've had money," he answered simply, "and I know what it means to be flat busted, too."

"Fifty a month is the best we can offer."

"All right."

She eyed him curiously. "The big ranches are looking for men right now, too," she said. "They're offering seventy-five a month to tophands, I've been told."

"That so? Happens I like small outfits, so your fifty sounds a heap better to me than their seventy-five."

"All right," she said with a lift of her shoulders. "If you're satisfied with our offer, even though we both know you can get more elsewhere, the job's yours. What's your name?"

"McGraw, ma'am. Frank McGraw."

"You're quite tall, aren't you?"

"Only six-two. I'm the shorty in my family."

"The rest of the McGraws must be giants!"

"We-ll, not exactly, ma'am. Just good-sized."

ALREADY he had taken note of several interesting things about her. She was by far the prettiest woman he had ever seen. Her features were perfect. Her hair was a brownish, almost reddish color, and her eyes were green, a soft, rich, velvety green. Her figure was well moulded.

At first glance he had judged her to be about twenty-five. When she smiled, he revised his estimate and decided she was younger, probably about twenty. But when the smile left her face, he reversed himself again and decided his first judgment had been correct.

What made him reconsider was the sadness that came into her eyes; it had a tendency to age her face beyond her years. Curiosity made him wonder about her husband but not for very long. She was much more interesting.

"Have you had breakfast?" she asked.

"Had it in town," he answered. "That's how I happened to hear 'bout you folks needing somebody."

He followed her eyes when she looked toward the bunkhouse, a squat, drab

building just past the corral.

"You'll find plenty of room for your things in the bunkhouse," she said shortly.

His lips parted in a smile. "Won't need much room," he said. "Got practically everything I own on me. Anything special you want me to do, ma'am? Or do you want me to have a look around and do whatever I see that needs doing?"

"I think the first thing you might do is see about our fences," she told him. "There are some pretty worn spots in the wire."

"All right."

"And just this much more, McGraw. Don't call me 'ma'am.'"

She turned away from him. He watched her go up the path that led to the house, a two-story affair that was in need of painting, and around it to the rear. A moment after she had rounded the house he heard a door open and close.

He started to lead his horse away, but feeling eyes on him, stopped and lifted his gaze to the house. Sitting at a closed upper-floor window and looking out at him was a man. Bright, dazzling sunlight suddenly glinted on the pane, and the man moved back before McGraw could get a good look at him.

It was about four-thirty when McGraw returned. He dismounted in front of the barn, stamped about briefly in an effort to rid his legs of the stiffness in them, then he led his horse inside. When he trudged out again some minutes later, he glanced at the house. The blind over the window at which the man had been sitting that morning had been drawn.

McGraw was idling in front of the small, empty corral, leaning over the gate, when there was a step behind him. He turned. Sally Baird came up to him. She smiled fleetingly.

"Goodness," she said. "You're a changed man."

He grinned at her. "You mean with my whiskers shaved off?"

"Yes. In addition to being big, are all the McGraws so good looking, too?"

"We-ll, now—"

"How did you find things?"

"Not bad," he answered. He leaned back against the gate, hooked the heel of his right boot over the middle bar. "Like you said, there were some spots in the

fence that needed fixing, so I took care of them. But there wasn't anything big that needed doing."

"Where'd you get the wire?"

"Figured there'd be some in the tool shed and there was. So I took some along with me. One thing though I wanted to ask you about. You use the Bar L brand on all your stock?"

"Of course!" she answered without hesitation, but she seemed surprised at his question.

"You folks buy any stock lately?"

"Y-es, we did. If I remember correctly, there were some eighty-odd head. Just before Len was hurt, I think it was. Why, McGraw? Why do you ask?"

"Found some steers wearing a Diamond brand and I got to wondering about them. Guess they must be part of the herd you bought."

"They must be. But just to make sure, I'll ask Len."

"You do that, and if he wants me to, I'll take care of venting the old brand and putting on the Bar L."

"If you want to wash up, you'd better do it now. Supper will be ready shortly."

He nodded. "Then what do I do? Come right up to the house, or what?"

"Come right up; of course."

II

McGraw had stripped off his outer shirt and was digging in his saddle-bag for a spare one when he heard hoofbeats. He opened the bunkhouse door and poked his head out. He saw a big, burly man pull up near the corral, look up at the house, and climb down from his horse. The man hitched up his pants and headed for the bunkhouse. McGraw eyed him wonderingly. He was dark-faced and scowling, thick through the shoulders and barrel-chested. He lumbered rather than walked. He spotted McGraw standing in the open doorway and quickened his pace. Halting at the doorstep he hooked his thumbs in his belt.

"Hello," McGraw said.

The man grunted. "You the feller who was ridin' fence today?" he asked.

"That's right," McGraw answered. "Something I can do for you?"

"Nope," the man said curtly. "But there's something you can do for your-

self, and the sooner you do it, the better off you'll be."

McGraw looked at him obliquely. "Yeah? What's that?"

"Pack your gear and go on about your business."

"Who are you?" McGraw said.

"My name's Baird—Ben Baird. My brother Len owns this place."

"What's the idea of shooing me off so sudden? I took the job with the understanding it'd be temporary, but I didn't figure it'd be this temporary."

"We've decided we don't need you around here."

"Who's 'we'?" McGraw demanded.

"Full of questions, aren't you, mister?"

"Damned right I am! Your brother tell you to let me go? Mrs. Baird was the one who took me on. How come your brother didn't have her tell me she'd changed her mind about hiring me?"

"I'm telling you for them," Baird said, his face darkening and his voice thickening. "So get going while you're still in one piece. You hear?"

"I hear, all right," McGraw said calmly. "But just for the hell of it, I think I'll stay put."

Baird glowered at him, then tight-lipped, he wheeled and stalked back to his horse, hoisted himself up into the saddle, and clattered off. Slowly McGraw moved inside the bunkhouse. Slowly he closed the door and leaned against it. There was a deepening frown on his face.

"Now what'n blazes do you suppose that was all about?" he wondered to himself. "Before I can even get used to the job, somebody starts shooing me off. What's going on around here? Must be a helluva lot that don't meet the eye. Yeah, a helluva lot. And I'm mule enough to stay put and stick my nose into it."

Ten minutes later he was sitting opposite Sally Baird in the kitchen of the big house. Supper was served and eaten in comparative silence, with only snatches of general conversation breaking the silence. Since she said nothing about letting him go, he took it to mean the decision had been reached without her knowledge.

He debated telling her about Ben Baird but decided against it. He would wait and see what happened. If a game were being played, he'd play along. When the meal

was finished, he pushed back from the table and got to his feet.

"That was real good," he said. "Dunno when I've eaten anything—"

"McGraw."

"Yeah?"

NOW, he told himself a little grimly, she was going to tell him he had reconsidered and that his job had come to an end.

"McGraw, did I imagine that I heard voices outside just before supper?"

He was certain then she hadn't been a party to the decision to let him go.

"Oh, you heard them, all right. I was talking to Ben Baird."

Her eyes widened and held on him. A flush appeared in her cheeks.

"He stopped by for a minute," he explained. "Said he'd seen me riding fence."

"Was that all he had to say?"

Deliberately he ignored her questions.

"Maybe he figured he oughta see for himself who you were hiring. After all, with your husband laid up, you're kinda alone, and maybe he was worried you might take on the wrong kind."

She looked away, avoiding his eyes.

"Your husband know about me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Think he's satisfied?"

"Of course," she said, and her gaze returned to him. "Why?"

"I just wondered, that's all. You think he might wanna see me?"

"When he does," she said a bit stiffly, "I'll let you know."

"All right."

He turned and started for the door.

"Sally!"

The call had come from upstairs. McGraw stopped and looked back at Sally over his shoulder. Their eyes met for a moment. She arose from the table and went swiftly out of the room. McGraw picked up his hat and waited near the door until Sally came back. There was an odd smile on her face.

"Len says he'd like to see you," she announced and went on musingly, "Funny. It was almost as though he had heard you asking if I didn't think he did."

He dropped his hat on a chair, and followed her out into a hallway off the

kitchen and up a flight of narrow, carpeted stairs to a softly lighted landing. She led the way toward a front room, turned once and looked at him, caught his eye and smiled, and shook her head. There was an open door ahead of them. She went in; he halted in the doorway.

"Come in, McGraw," a man's voice called.

McGraw stepped inside. Sitting in a far corner in a big chair, with a blanket wrapped around him and drawn up almost to his chin, was a man with a friendly, smiling face. It was a fairly young face, but pain and suffering had aged it. His brown hair was touched with gray.

Sally crossed the room with a lighted lamp in her hand. She squeezed through between her husband's chair and the bed to a bureau that was backed against the side wall. She placed the lamp on the bureau, turned the light up, and looked at her husband.

"How's that, Len?" she asked. "Not too bright, is it?"

"No," Len Baird answered without taking his eyes from McGraw. "Sit over here, McGraw."

He nodded toward the bed. McGraw came forward, stopped to permit Sally to pass him, then squeezed past Baird's chair. He looked down, eyeing the satiny spread a little doubtfully.

"Sit down, man," Baird said. "You won't hurt it."

McGraw seated himself on the edge of the bed a little gingerly. His gaze lifted, shifted from Baird to Sally—who was standing in the doorway. In the lamplight, she was suddenly the most desirable woman he had ever seen. He felt Baird's eyes on him and feeling embarrassed, hastily took his eyes from Sally.

"If you want anything, Len," he heard Sally say, "please call me."

SHE went out, and McGraw listened to her footsteps die away. The room's silence made itself felt then.

"My wife has told me everything you've told her about yourself," Baird began. "Anything you may have forgotten or thought too unimportant to mention?"

McGraw smiled. "No, I don't think there's anything more to add to what you know now," he answered. "Guess I'm one of those people who lead kinda

dull lives."

"Married?"

McGraw shook his head.

"Any attachments of any kind?"

"You mean women?" McGraw said. "Nope, none."

"Mind telling me how old you are?"

"I'm twenty-nine."

"Where's your home, McGraw?"

"Oklahoma."

"Family?"

"Mother and father, sisters and brothers. And all all right. Leastways, they were the last time I heard."

"Know ranching pretty well, do you?"

"Yeah, pretty well," McGraw said with a grin. "I was born and raised on a ranch. Fact is, it's the only kind of life I've ever known."

"I suppose you're wondering why I should be so interested in you in view of the fact that you've only been hired to do a couple of months' work?"

"We-ll, I admit I'm a mite curious."

"Do you mind closing the door?" McGraw arose, worked his way past Baird to the door, closed the door quietly, and returned to his seat on the edge of the bed. "My wife doesn't know what I am about to tell you, McGraw. She thinks my horse stumbled and threw me and that after a matter of time I'll be well again. My horse didn't throw me. He fell on me and crushed my insides beyond repair. My doctor won't venture an opinion as to how long I may live. But I have my own ideas and I know it won't be very much longer."

"Bad as all that, huh?"

"Yes. Now I've got to make whatever preparations I can for the future. Not mine. My wife's. I want to protect her. You are the most capable-looking man we've seen 'round these parts in a long time, McGraw. That's why I'm so interested in you. The others were just—well, saddle tramps. What will it take to keep you here permanently?"

"Dunno," McGraw answered. "Haven't thought about anything like that."

"Think you might be interested in a proposition that would give you a part ownership in the Bar L, possibly full ownership?"

"Every man's interested in becoming the owner of something."

"Particularly when that something is

worth while. Well, here's your chance, McGraw."

"It sounds good, but I'd like to think about it before I take you up on it," McGraw said. "Suppose you give me a day or two?"

"What's today?"

"Tuesday." How 'bout Friday?"

"Fine. I'll look forward to seeing you then. Oh, just one thing, McGraw."

"Yeah? You don't want me to mention this to anybody. That what you were gonna say?"

"Yes."

"Don't worry about me running off at the mouth. I've got faults same as most other people, but talking out of turn ain't one of them. See you Friday. So long."

III

IT WAS evening, moonlit and starry. A chill wind that had sprung up shortly after sundown, whipped and spun dust about from the churned up surface of the corral. McGraw, jacketed, and with his collar turned up and his hat brim yanked down to shield his eyes from the dust, was leaning over the gate.

He heard a step behind him and came erect. When it came closer, he turned around. A cloaked figure that he knew was Sally Baird emerged from the shadows thrown off by the house.

"Hello," he said as she came up to him. "Come out to get a breath of air and an eye-ful of dust?"

"It has blown up, hasn't it?"

"Turn your back to the corral," he said. "Dust won't bother you then."

She turned as he directed and backed against the bars.

"Noticed Len's light is out," he remarked. "He asleep already?"

"He's been asleep for some time now."

"Wasn't the doctor supposed to be out to see him today?"

"He was here this afternoon. Len's to keep to his bed indefinitely."

"Thought you looked extra worried at supper," McGraw said. "Figured it had something to do with Len and I started to ask you a couple of times. But I knew if you wanted me to know, you'd tell me."

"I'm afraid Len's a lot worse than I thought," Sally said.

"What makes you say that? Doctor say

anything?"

"No, he didn't. But he never says much."

"Might be you're making things a heap worse than they are. Imagining things, imagining the worst when there ain't any call for it. You mind me asking you something?"

She raised her eyes to him in assent.

"How long you and Len been married?"

"Seven years," Sally answered.

"You musta been awfully young."

"I was sixteen."

McGraw looked surprised. "And how old was Len?"

"Thirty-one," Sally said.

"That makes him thirty-eight now," McGraw observed.

"And I'm twenty-three."

"The way you said that, anybody'd think you were old."

She made no response.

"Being cooped up here, taking care of Len has probably got you feeling low," he went on. "Don't anybody ever come to see you? Haven't got any friends or family?"

"I haven't anyone."

"Oh," he said. Then deciding the subject had been pursued far enough, he asked, "Where's Ben's place?"

"Ben Baird? Eastward. Why?"

"I was just wondering about him."

"Have you seen him again?"

"A couple of times, but always from a distance," McGraw said. "He got a family?"

"Wife and a daughter," Sally said.

"Don't they ever come over here?"

"No. Len and Ben haven't been very friendly."

"Too bad when brothers don't get along," McGraw said.

"They aren't really brothers. They're stepbrothers." With that, she said, "I'm getting cold. I think I'll go in."

THEY parted when they neared the house. McGraw perched on the bunk-house doorstep, dug a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. He inhaled deeply, and the cigarette glowed brightly in the night.

He sank back, resting his head and shoulders against the closed door.

There was a sudden clap of thunder, the silence-shattering roar of gunfire, and the ominous whine of a bullet. Instinctive-



McGraw pulled out the gun he had taken from Pete

ly, McGraw threw himself sideways, landing on the hard ground in an awkward sprawl. He heard the bullet strike the door frame and splinter it. He was on his knees almost instantly, crouching behind the jutting doorstep. He probed the darkness with angry eyes.

He saw nothing, but his keen ears picked up the beat of departing hoofs, and after a minute's wait, he got up on his feet. He heard swift, running steps and looked toward the house. A shadowy figure appeared. Moonlight ran along the barrel of the rifle in her hands. McGraw moved across the intervening space to meet her.

"You shouldn't have come out," he said.

"Who—who was it?" she asked breathlessly.

"Somebody who hasn't got the guts to try that in the light," he answered. "He's gone. So forget it."

She turned without a word. Hitching up his levis, he went back to the bunkhouse, dug his gun out of his saddlebag, and laid it in his bunk. He bolted the door, undressed and climbed into the bunk, and with the gun within reach, went to sleep.

In the morning, when he emerged from the bunkhouse, he examined the door frame. The bullet had struck it at the very top of the frame. Twenty feet away there was a clump of thin brush which his at-

tacker had probably used for cover.

Even an ordinary marksman would have had little trouble hitting him, yet his assailant had missed him. But had he really missed or had he fired high deliberately? McGraw, debating the matter with himself, quickly decided that the latter had been the case, that the shot was merely a follow-up to Ben Baird's warning that he clear out and that it had been fired in an attempt to frighten him away from the Bar L.

When he entered the house for breakfast, Sally, who was setting two places at the table, looked up at him anxiously. He gave her a reassuring smile and took his place at the table. Conversation was brief and a little strained. Apparently she was waiting for him to mention the gunshot. But he said nothing about it, finished his breakfast and left the house.

For two solid hours he rode the fence that separated the Baird brothers' properties. About the middle of the morning Ben Baird appeared, and McGraw, spotting him, rode to meet him. They stopped abreast of each other.

"I've been looking for you, Baird," McGraw announced.

"That so?"

"Just want you to know that next time, I'll be ready for you."

Baird lifted his shoulders. "If you say so."

"This time, though, the boot's on the other foot," McGraw went on. "Instead of you being the one to hand out the warning, I'm gonna do it. The next time you take a shot at me, Baird, you'd better make sure you hit me. If you miss, it'll be too damned bad for you."

"Yeah?" Baird taunted.

MCGRAW gave him a level look. "Yeah. Because I'll shoot back and I usually hit what I shoot at. And while I'm telling you what's what, I might as well tell you this, too."

Baird's lip curled a little. "You're sure full of big talk today, aren't you?"

"I knew you were lying when you said your brother and sister-in-law had changed their minds and decided they didn't need me around the place after all. Right after you left, I went up to the house, and your brother said he wanted me to stay on permanent. You're a helluva

lousy liar, and I don't think you're much with a gun. What else you gonna try your clumsy hand at?"

Baird was scowling now.

"One of these fine days," he said darkly, "I'm gonna beat the hell outa you."

"What's the matter with today? Or don't you like Thursdays?"

Baird didn't answer. He jerked the reins and rode away. McGraw, watching him with angry eyes, was aware that he hadn't gained anything. In fact, when he finally wheeled away from the fence, he was more annoyed with himself than he was with Baird. He had wanted to force Baird into a showdown.

It hadn't come off because Baird had refused to admit or deny anything, and even though McGraw had flung at him what had amounted to a challenge, he had refused to consider it one.

Now McGraw wished he hadn't gone looking for him. Having caught up with him, it would have been better if he hadn't mentioned the shot. He realized that now, just as he realized that it would have been better if he had maneuvered the conversation so as to force Baird into a corner from which there would have been no squirming out. Then he might have been able to pressure Baird into an admission of guilt.

Sally came into his thoughts and forced Ben into the background. Every time he had mentioned Ben's name to her, there had been a noticeable reaction by Sally. Was she afraid of him? Did the fact that Len and Ben had no fondness for each other have anything to do with her? There was something rotten somewhere, and since he had been caught in the middle of it, it bothered him. Ben had tried to frighten him off the Bar L; Len in turn had sought to get him to agree to stay on permanently. It didn't make sense.

He began to wonder if he wouldn't have been better off signing on with one of the big ranches. Then he would have been just another hand, and the personal, intimate relationships of the owners wouldn't have touched him. He would have had a job to do, but that would have been all that was expected of a hired hand. He wouldn't have been expected to become involved in anything beyond the bunkhouse.

There was, he admitted unhappily, a great deal to be said for the big ranches. But then Len came into his mind's eye beside Sally. They looked so helpless, so badly in need of a strong, protective arm. He felt sorry for them. He couldn't very well walk out on them.

But he held his sympathies in check. He was willing to do whatever he could for them but he would impose one condition upon them before he went any farther. They would have to be honest with him. They would have to tell him what was going on about him.

If they wouldn't do that, or couldn't, then he would quit and move on to a place where he would be free of involvements. Determined to have the matter settled without delay, he wheeled and rode back to the ranch.

HE PULLED up in front of the barn and swung down. He hitched up his levis, gave his hat brim a little tug and started for the house. He stopped abruptly. A buckboard was standing squarely in front of the house. He frowned and rubbed his chin. He wondered about the Bairds' caller wondered whom it might be.

After a moment, he returned to the corral, and perched on the top rail. He had to have answers to the questions that were plaguing him. He would wait till the visitor departed, even if it meant waiting all day.

When he heard a door open, he raised up and fixed his gaze on the head of the path. A shadow preceded Sally Baird as she came around the rear of the house. A man followed her, and McGraw saw at once that he was no ranch hand. He was too well dressed. He wore good clothes and wore them well, with the ease of a man accustomed to them.

As he came down the path at Sally's heels, McGraw got a better look at him. He was in his forties, perhaps even older than that. His long sideburns were tinged with gray.

The man followed Sally to the buckboard. He helped her up to the high seat, tucked her full skirts around her legs, and climbed up beside her. McGraw jumped down from the rail. The man said something to Sally, and she laughed and answered. McGraw frowned. He knew he

had no right to resent the man, but he did. The man unwound the reins from around the hand brake.

Sally's head turned when she heard McGraw's step and he came up to the buckboard. He thought she flushed a little.

"Going somewhere?" he asked.

The man and he looked at each other.

"I've got to go to Woodbridge," Sally answered, and he turned his gaze upon her. "I've got to attend to some business for Len. Mr. Saunders has offered to drive me in." Then, "Will you stay close by, please, McGraw, in case Len wants something?"

"Sure. How you gonna get back?"

"I'll see that Mrs. Baird is driven home," the man said.

McGraw didn't look at him again. The buckboard wheeled away.

IV

AT EXACTLY eight o'clock McGraw rode into the long main street of the town of Woodbridge. There was little activity. Most of the stores had closed, and lights were being dimmed in others. The hotel, two stories high, and a few other buildings reared darkly into the night.

Horsemen, people in buckboards, and passersby glanced at McGraw as he came down the street. He pulled up in front of the bank, climbed down from his horse, hitched up his levis, and looked about him. He heard footsteps and looked around as a man sauntered up.

"Evenin'," the man said with a half salute.

"Evening," McGraw responded. Then catching sight of a shiny star pinned to the flap of the man's shirt pocket, he asked: "Sheriff, where'll I find a feller named Saunders?"

"Right up there, the lawman answered, turning and pointing to a darkened window on the upper floor of the bank building. "His office is up there."

"Lawyer, huh?"

"Yep; and a good one, too. He's usually in 'round this time. Guess he musta got tied up somewhere."

"I can wait."

"Why don't you try him at the hotel? He lives there. Got the whole top floor. Could be he stopped there for supper."

"I don't mind waiting."

The sheriff shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said carelessly and walked off.

There was a clock in the bank window, and McGraw glanced at it from time to time as he idled at the curb. The minutes passed. It was eight-twenty when he lit a cigarette; it was eight-thirty when he tossed the inch-long butt into the gutter. At eight-forty, he lit another. His horse pawed the ground impatiently, whinnied and nuzzled McGraw.

McGraw frowned and stalked up the street and climbed the steps of the hotel veranda. On one side of it a door opened into a bar where some men were drinking. The door on the other side opened into a hall that was shadowy and dark. A murmur of voices drifted out from the bar. McGraw crossed the veranda and stepped inside the hall.

A glass-paneled, curtained door confronted him. He turned the knob and the door opened. He pushed through to a stairway and looked up. He closed the door behind him mechanically. A flickering ceiling lamp cast a circle of light over the landing and the bottom steps.

He mounted the stairs and went up as noiselessly as he could, stopping briefly when a floor board creaked underfoot. After a moment he went on again, halted on the landing, and stood for a moment looking about him. There were several closed doors and his gaze shuttled back and forth until he spied a tiny ray of light beneath one. He moved toward it, tiptoed across the landing and listened at the door. He heard nothing. He rapped, and getting no response, knocked a second time.

AFTER a brief wait, he turned the door-knob, and the door opened. A quick look inside showed him a table in the middle of the room. There were dishes on the table, a wine bottle and two glasses. McGraw opened the door wider and stepped inside. A door at the far side of it opened, and Saunders, flushed and in shirt sleeves came in, smoothing back his hair. He stopped abruptly when he saw McGraw.

"What—what are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I'm lookin' for Mrs. Baird."

"She isn't here."

"You wouldn't fool me, would you?" McGraw asked scornfully. He walked around the table to a chair with a woman's jacket draped around its back. He snatched it off and flung it at Saunders. The lawyer, backing, put up his hands instinctively, and the jacket fell in a heap at his feet. "Tell her I'll be waiting for her downstairs."

He walked to the door and looked back at Saunders over his shoulder.

"Nice people, you two," he said coldly. "You ought to be real proud of yourselves. She's his wife and I'll bet he thinks you're his friend. And him laying in a sick bed and chances are he'll never get up out of it again." He opened the door. "Changed my mind," he announced. "I won't wait for her. You can take her home."

He flung the door wide open and strode out. The door swung wildly and slammed shut.

He stood on the veranda, filling his lungs with the clear, crisp air. Then he went down the steps to the sidewalk and stalked back to his horse. He glanced at the clock. It was nearly nine. He climbed into the saddle and wheeled around.

Someone emerged from the hotel. It was Sally. He frowned and nudged his horse into movement. Sally came quickly across the walk to the curb, stepped down into the gutter, and waited for him to come up to her. He reined in and looked down at her.

"Please, McGraw—"

He was motionless for a moment. Then he leaned down, caught her around the waist, lifted her and set her in front of him. A sharp jerk of the reins sent the horse on his way. The street was hushed now, shadowy and dark. At the corner they wheeled into the road that led to the Bar L.

Sally, sitting sideways, was slightly hunched over. For a time there was no sound other than the rhythmic beat of the horse's hoofs drumming against the deepening silence.

"McGraw, does Len know you came to town?"

"Yeah. Told him I had to get some things for myself."

There was another span of silence, and then Sally said, "McGraw, have you ever been lonely? Really and truly lonely?"

"Sure."

"A man can do something about it when it gets too much for him," she went on without looking at him. "It's different with a woman."

"Is it?" he grunted.

"She fights against it, against yielding to it, till there's no more fight left in her. Then she—"

"Look," he interrupted her. "You don't have to explain anything to me. What you do is your business. I only work for you. Remember?"

"But I want you to know what—"

"You comfortable?"

"Comfortable enough."

THEY rode on in silence. Sally's head was still bent. When the drumming hoofs began to lull her, she sighed once or twice, and her head bowed even lower. Slowly she sank back against McGraw. Her head came to rest against his chest, and her hair fluttered in his face. There was an intoxicating fragrance from it, and its effect was overpowering.

Just as he felt himself succumbing to it, he managed to twist away from her. He had to grab her to keep her from tumbling earthward. Head held high and slightly turned away from her, he rode stiff-backed.

"We're home," he announced after they had topped the upgrade and pulled up in front of the barn. He nudged Sally. "We're home."

She stirred and slowly raised her head.

"Oh," she said. "I—I must have dozed off."

"Yeah, guess you did." He climbed down. "Hang on now."

He led the horse up the ramp and into the barn, the animal's hoofs thumping hollowly on the planking. The barn was so dark he couldn't see his hand in front of his face, and he brought the horse to an abrupt halt.

"Stay put for a minute till I make a light," he instructed.

He started away. He stopped instantly when Sally, disregarding his instructions, began to slide down. He caught her in his arms. Before he could do anything to stop her, her arms were around his neck, and she was clinging to him and her lips were against his in a bruising, breathtaking kiss.

He knew he should have pushed her away, but he didn't. Instead, his arms tightened around her, crushing her to him, and he kissed her hungrily. Then just as suddenly as the desire for her had come over him, it was gone. He drew her arms down and pushed her away.

"Guess I'm no better'n Saunders is, after all," he said bitterly. "I tell him what I think of him, then I go an' do this. I ought to go back an' tell him about it and give *him* a chance to tell me what he thinks of *me*. What's good for one ought to be good for the other."

He groped around in the darkness and found a lantern hanging from a wall peg and got it lit.

He said curtly over his shoulder, "What are you waitin' for? Don't you think you've done enough for one night? Go up to the house where you belong."

She stood in the doorway, smoothing down her dress and fussing with her hair, then flung him a look that angered him even more, and went out.

He was furious with her, but even more furious with himself. She had made a fool of him but only because he had been weak, a more than willing party to her trickery. A kiss that had meant nothing to her had won for her. Afraid that he might tell Len about her and Saunders, she had taken measures to seal his lips. Now he couldn't very well tell Len about Saunders without telling about himself.

He glowered as he thought about it. Then he realized that she hadn't accomplished anything, after all. There was something he could do, and there was nothing she could do to stop him. His eyes brightened.

She was probably gloating now, but his turn would come, and then she'd find she hadn't been so smart. He'd be up early the next morning, dressed and ready for her before she could prepare herself for him. His gear would be in his saddlebags and his horse would be ready to go. He'd announce he was quitting and draw his time, and all the pleading in the world, even tears, would avail her nothing.

Then he'd put as much distance between the Bairds and himself as he could and if he never heard of them again, that would be all right with him. His eyes gleamed and he wished it was morning so that he could shake the dust of the Bar

L from his boots.

He could still feel the pressure of her lips on his, and the taste of her kiss was in his mouth. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as he went outside. Light shone from an upper window. His eyes hardened. He pictured Sally standing before her mirror, smiling at her reflection because she was so pleased with herself. His mouth tightened. Tomorrow would be another story.

V

DAWN was just breaking when McGraw awoke. He pushed off his blanket and sat up in his bunk. The floor boards were cold when he stood up on his bare feet, but he braved the cold to walk to the window and peer out at the house. The long fingered shadows that had draped themselves over it were just beginning to lift.

Shivering, he went back to his clothes and got dressed. He was just tucking his shirt into his levis when there were quick, running footsteps outside. He stood motionless listening to them. They came closer. There was a sudden knock on the door.

He frowned. "Yeah?" he called grumpily.

"McGraw!"

It was Sally Baird's voice. His frown deepened.

"I'm getting dressed," he told her curtly. "What do you want?"

"It's Len," she answered breathlessly.

"What about him?"

"He's had some kind of an attack and he's in pain," she rushed on. "We've got to get the doctor."

He cursed inwardly. Although it meant delaying his plans, he had to do what he could for the injured Len Baird. Decency demanded it.

"All right," he said curtly as before. "Go back to the house. I'll go get the doctor."

"Thank you," she said with a graciousness that irritated him.

Minutes later he emerged from the bunkhouse, pulling on his jacket and muttering darkly to himself. There was an uncomfortable chill in the air, and he turned up the collar around his neck.

The ride to Woodbridge was swift and

uneventful. Save for one man, an aproned storekeeper, who was sweeping off the sidewalk in front of his place, the town was still asleep. The man stopped plying his broom when he heard approaching hoofbeats, turned quickly, and looked in their direction. McGraw pulled his horse to a dust-raising halt.

"Where'll I find the doctor?" he asked.

"Down the street a ways," the storekeeper replied. "On the other side."

McGraw nodded and guided his mount to the curb on the opposite side of the street. His eyes ranged over the buildings, seeking the doctor's shingle. He spied it shortly, swinging in the morning breeze from an iron arm that jutted out over a doorway. He pulled up, swung down from the saddle, strode briskly across the walk to the door, and banged on it with his fist. There was no immediate response. Just as he was about to repeat the knocking, a window was run up almost directly above the door.

"What do you want?" a sleepy voice called.

McGraw looked up. A tousled head was poked out of the window, and sleepy eyes were focusing on him.

"You the doctor?" he asked.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Len Baird, Doc. He's in a bad way. Can you come right away?"

"Give me fifteen minutes," was the answer.

"Want me to wait for you?" McGraw asked.

"No, that won't be necessary. You go ahead. I'll follow you."

"All right."

McGraw trudged back to his horse, swung up on him, and rode up the street. The storekeeper had finished sweeping the sidewalk and was standing at the curb, his gaze held on McGraw.

"Found the doctor all right, huh?" he called as McGraw came abreast of him.

"Yeah, sure."

The storekeeper chuckled. "He don't like it when his sleep gets busted up. Who's sick?"

"My boss," McGraw called over his shoulder.

"That so? Who's your boss?" the man yelled after him.

McGraw pretended that he hadn't heard. He rode on at a quickened pace.

A BRIGHT, warm morning came and went. It was nearly noon when the doctor emerged from the Baird ranch house and trudged down the path to his buckboard. McGraw, idling in front of the barn, straightened up and sauntered over to him.

"How is he, Doc?" he asked.

The doctor looked down at him from the driver's seat. He was a bespectacled, studious looking man of about forty-five.

"He's resting now," he replied, "and fairly comfortably. I'll be back this evening for another look at him."

"Think he'll be all right, huh?"

The doctor shrugged and said, "I take it you're the McGraw he told me about?"

McGraw smiled. "I'm McGraw, all right," he said.

"Good thing for Len he was able to find someone as capable as you. Would have been quite a problem for him if he hadn't. Ranches don't usually run themselves."

McGraw made no response.

"Well," the doctor said, gripping the reins, "I've got to be going. 'By, McGraw."

The buckboard rumbled away, its wheels spinning and biting into the ground and spewing dirt. It took the downgrade and disappeared from view.

McGraw was motionless for a moment, deeply thoughtful as though he were debating a question with himself. He stirred suddenly and with an unconscious squaring of his shoulders, like a man about to deliver himself of some drastic announcement, strode up the path and rounded the house to the back door. It opened as he came up to it.

"I was just going to call you," Sally said with a smile. "You must be starved."

"I can hold out till I get to town," McGraw muttered.

She looked surprised but she did not voice the question that showed in her eyes. She moved back, holding the door wide for him. He took off his hat as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him, but instead of dropping his hat on a chair, as he usually did, he held it under his arm. He came forward to the table. She had walked around it to the far side, and now they stood facing each other.

Her eyes met his calmly. There was no shame in them, no regret, no embarrassment. It was as though last night hadn't

happened or, if it had, hadn't really meant anything and was therefore to be forgotten. Apparently that was how she felt about it. But instead of easing his conscience, her attitude served to heighten his own sense of guilt, and he felt himself flush. She smiled again suddenly.

"Oh, I meant to tell you last night," she said. "The business I had to take care of for Len when I went to Woodbridge concerned you. Instead of looking so grim about it, you should be pleased. You are now a part owner of the Bar L, McGraw. We had to deliver the signed papers for filing or registering or whatever it is they do with them."

"Sorry you had to go to all that trouble for nothing," McGraw said.

Her expression indicated that she didn't understand.

"I'm quitting," he said quietly. "I'm drawing my time and moving on."

"But you can't do that," she said quickly. "Not now. Not when you're a part owner of the place. You can't just walk away from it. You're as much responsible for it as Len and I are. Well, almost as much."

"I'm not responsible for anything that has to do with the Bar L," he answered. "I don't want any part of it."

"McGraw, is it because of what happened last night that you feel this way?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he answered curtly. "I'm through and that's the end of it."

"If it is," she went on, disregarding his answer, "you haven't anything to worry about. I haven't told Len and I don't intend to."

HE STARED hard at her. For a moment he wasn't quite sure that he had heard her correctly. Perhaps he had misunderstood what she had said. But if he had heard her correctly and hadn't misunderstood, she hadn't done anything wrong. She was implying that he alone was guilty.

"Len thinks so highly of you," she continued, "I wouldn't want to disillusion him."

"You wouldn't, huh?"

"Of course not," she said.

"It's real kindly of you to be so considerate of him," he said sarcastically. "Course it couldn't be, could it, that you're

so blamed anxious to spare him because you wouldn't want him to know what kind of a wife you've been to him? You might be fooling him, but you aren't fooling me, Sally. I know you went through that kissing business out in the barn with me because you figured that was a sure way of making me keep my mouth shut. You figured I couldn't go and tell him about you and Saunders without telling him about you and me."

She went to the door that opened upon the hallway, closed it quietly, and came back to the table.

"Will you listen to me for just one minute, please?"

"For one minute," he agreed.

"Thank you. The doctor hasn't told me, but I have it on good authority that he doesn't give Len six months," she began.

"I'm sorry for Len, but what's that got to do with me?" he demanded.

"It has a great deal to do with you. Look at it realistically, McGraw. I can't run the ranch by myself. That's a man's job. You're a part owner now. Six months from now you'll be a half owner."

"Not me!" he exploded.

"After that," she continued calmly, "it will be up to you how soon you become the full owner. You see, McGraw, I've looked ahead and the plans I've made include you."

"Yeah? Well, mine don't include you!" he stated flatly.

"Forget me for the moment. Think of Len. I don't believe you'd be able to live with yourself if you walked out on him now."

McGraw gave her a hard look.

"Now there's one thing more," she continued in her irritatingly calm way. "I hadn't intended speaking of it just yet. However, I suppose I might as well tell you now. I like you, Frank. I liked you the very first minute I saw you. Stay on here and run the ranch as you've been doing, and six months after Len goes, I'll marry you."

"The minute's about up," he reminded her.

"I've known many men, McGraw. I've never known one who didn't want me." He laughed harshly. "Here's one who don't!"

She smiled knowingly. "You aren't being honest with yourself, Frank," she

said. "It's just that you haven't the courage to take what you want."

"For Len's sake, not for yours, I'll stay on for a couple more days. I'll pass the word around in town that you're looking for a man."

"The best we see out here are drifters," Sally objected.

"Pick the best looking one that comes along and take him out to the barn and he'll quit drifting and stay put here," he advised. "Now there's just one thing I want understood between us."

"I'm listening, Frank," she said quietly.

"It's a couple of days, like I said, but no more than that. If you don't get anybody, it'll be too bad, because I'll have to be on my way regardless."

He walked to the door, and she followed him with her eyes. He turned to her again with his hand on the knob.

"For the rest of the time that I'll be here," he said, "we'll stay clear of each other. Be better that way."

She made no comment. He put on his hat and rolled the brim with his big hands while she watched.

"I'll get my grub, breakfast and supper in town, and I'll bring back something with me every morning so I can eat in the middle of the day without coming to the house."

He opened the door and went out.

VI

THEY saw nothing of each other the next two days. He arose earlier than usual and rode into town for his breakfast. Returning to the ranch, he took a circuitous route to avoid the house and went directly to his work. When the day was done, he took the same roundabout route back to town. It was late when he returned from it. When he came back the third night, about nine, there was a light in the kitchen. He trudged up the path and around the house to the back door, knocked on it, and when Sally called an answer, opened it and went in. She was hunched over at the table, her elbows resting on it and her clasped hands supporting her chin.

"Evening," he said. She moved back in her chair. "Have any luck? You hire somebody?"

She shook her head.

"You mean nobody even came around?"

"There were three men here," she answered. "Two yesterday afternoon and one this morning."

"Oh!" he said. "That's better. For a minute there you had me wondering, because there were some fellers in town yesterday morning looking for work, and I talked to a couple of 'em and told 'em to ride out here and see you. They said they would. Decent looking men and they sounded like they knew their way around a ranch. So three of them showed up, huh? But you didn't take any. What happened? They want too much dough?"

"No," she replied. "We didn't get that far. The first one was the filthiest looking individual I'd ever seen."

"He couldn't have been one of those I talked to."

She shrugged and continued, "The second one—well, I just didn't like his looks. He had beady little eyes and a smirk on his face and he made me uncomfortable. I felt as though he were looking through me instead of at me."

"What about the third feller?" he asked.

"I was upstairs when he got here," she related. "I saw him from Len's window. He looked better than the other two. But I watched him looking around and just when I was about to call to him and tell him I'd be right down, he rode off. Guess he didn't like what he saw."

"That's too bad," McGraw said. "Hoped you'd get somebody before I moved on. Still, I'm leaving things in pretty good shape, so if it takes you a couple more days to get somebody—"

He didn't finish. His voice trailed away and died out. He moved forward a few steps and stopped again.

"I'll be leaving here tomorrow morning," he told her. "I'd sure appreciate it if you'd have my wages ready for me then. Leastways whatever's due me for the time I've been here. 'Course, if you can let me have it now, it'd be even better. Then I wouldn't have to bother you for it tomorrow. I could be up early and—"

"Have you gotten yourself another job already?" she asked.

"Where I'm going I know I won't have any trouble finding one. I'm gonna head for California. So what d'you say? Think

you can pay me off now?"

"I'm afraid not," she said, shaking her head.

He was disappointed and showed it.

She shook her head. "I don't have very much money myself," she explained. "Just a few dollars. I'll have to get what I need for you from Len. But I'd rather not disturb him now because he's probably asleep."

"I wouldn't want you to wake him up for that now, either," he said. "I can wait till tomorrow."

Their eyes met and held, but neither one said anything. He hadn't noticed it before, but now, standing before her, he was aware of a depressing and oppressive silence in the house, and it made him feel a little uneasy. When it began to weigh on him, an eagerness to get away from it before it overcame him made him back toward the door.

"Good night," he said, moving toward the door.

There was no answer. He went out, closing the door behind him. He felt better in the cool night air as he strode around the house and went briskly along the path. When he came to the front of the house, he slowed his step and looked up at Len's window. The blind was drawn to within a couple of inches of the sill.

He could see that the room was in total darkness and he was satisfied that Len was asleep and that Sally hadn't misrepresented it. Moonlight glinted on the window and was gone, leaving the window dark, like the room behind it. He moved on again toward the bunkhouse.

Sally's attitude had surprised him, agreeably of course. He had expected a far different kind of parting and had prepared himself for it as best he could. He had expected tears and a last minute emotional plea. That she had accepted his leaving with such good grace was a relief to him. He hated tears and he hated scenes, particularly when there wasn't any valid reason for them, and certainly there wasn't any reason for them in this instance. He was sure that once he had gone his way, he would be out of her thoughts and life just as she would be out of his. He felt easier in his mind when he entered the bunkhouse and prepared to turn in.

He was up early the next morning, as

he had planned. With his blanket roll and saddlebags hung in place, he paced up and down in front of the barn, waiting impatiently for the time to go by. It was about seven when he marched up to the house. Sally opened the door when he knocked.

"Morning," he said.

"Good morning," she responded.

She was wearing her jacket over her dress, and he wondered about it, but he didn't wonder aloud. A question required an answer, and that meant conversation, and talk was time consuming, and he was anxious to be done with her and on his way. She began to button her jacket as he watched.

"McGraw, I'm afraid I'll have to keep you waiting a while longer," she told him. "Len hasn't very much cash in the house. In fact, very little. And what little he has, he thinks we ought to hold on to. So I've got to go to town and get more from the bank."

"Oh," he said, making no attempt to conceal his disappointment.

"I'll be back as quickly as I can," she said.

"Wait a minute. What time is it now? About seven, huh?"

"Ten minutes after. Why?"

"Bank don't open till half past eight," McGraw observed. "Leastways, that's what the sign in the window says."

"I know. It will give me time to do some marketing and still be first in line when the bank opens," Sally explained.

"How 'bout me ridin' into town with you?" he asked. "Save me waiting around here. You can pay me off there and be done with it."

"But that means Len would be left alone here."

He showed his disappointment again.

"I promise I'll be back as quickly as I can. Oh, would you give Len his medicine for me?"

THE suggestion did not arouse any eagerness in him, but the look on her face made him say grumpily, "Oh, all right. Where do I find it and when do I have to give it to him?"

"It's on the bureau next to his bed," she replied. "A spoonful at eight o'clock. You don't really mind, do you?"

He made an impatient gesture and said,

"You'd better get going. It's getting later all the time, you know."

"How about the buckboard? Have you done anything about the broken wheel?"

"Did all I could about it," he said. "Told the feller who runs the stable in town to get you a new wheel, and he said he would. Guess he hasn't gotten it yet. Look, do you want to take my horse? He's standing in front of the barn, saddled up and set to go."

"Thank you. You won't forget about Len's medicine, will you?"

"Nope," he said curtly. "Want me to give you a boost up?"

"I'll manage, all right. This won't be the first time I've gotten up on a horse by myself."

He shrugged and stepped back, and she came out. He closed the door after and followed her to the head of the path.

"Don't keep me waiting any longer than you have to," he urged.

He halted and watched her go down the path. While he was thinking that she carried herself so well and walked so gracefully, she stopped suddenly and looked back at him.

"What's the matter now?" he demanded.

"There's a pot of coffee on the stove," she told him. "Put a light under it and help yourself. And if you look in the bread box, you'll find something to go with the coffee."

"Right," he responded, although he knew he wouldn't touch either the coffee or the bread box. But there would have been no point in telling her that. It would have meant more talk and more delay, and there had been enough of both, in fact, more than enough.

When she got to his horse and reached for the reins, the animal backed away, but she lunged, caught the reins, and stopped him, and with an ease that made McGraw marvel, swung herself into the saddle. She wheeled and rode out of sight.

McGraw turned slowly and walked back to the house and stood with his back against the door. He was frowning darkly. Things hadn't gone as he had hoped they would. He had hoped to be on his way by this time. Now, even if she kept her word and returned without delay, it would be a matter of some two hours, perhaps more, before he would be able

to get started on his way.

He produced a cigarette, tapped the ends on his thumb nail, and put it between his lips. He dug in his pocket for a match, and when a search failed to produce one, tramped into the house and took a handful from a metal box on a ledge above the stove.

Inhaling deeply, he sauntered over to the table, pulled out a chair and slumped down in it on the end of his spine with his long legs thrust out and crossed. Impatience forced him up again, and he walked idly and aimlessly around the room. He stopped when he came to the window. He parted the half curtains and peered out. It had brightened considerably.

It would be a nice day after all, he told himself.

HE SAUNTERED outside again after a time and stood with his shoulders against the closed door, drinking in the sweet, rich goodness that was in the morning air.

He tossed his cigarette away and paced about, looking skyward every now and then as new day developed.

Time passed slowly. Twice he went back into the house to look at the clock that stood atop the dish cupboard. The second time it was seven fifty-five, nearly time for Len's medicine. He dropped his hat on a chair and started out of the room only to halt in his tracks when he heard the unmistakable sound of approaching horses' hoofs.

It couldn't be Sally returning, he told himself. It was too soon. The hoofbeats swelled as they came closer. He went to the door, peered out and when he couldn't see anyone coming, he stepped outside. He marched to the head of the path and looked in the direction of the upgrade, expecting horsemen to top it at any moment.

His eyes shifted to the corral. He went about halfway down the path and stopped again. Four mounted men came into view, loped around the corral, and swerved toward the house, strung out in single file. Sunlight glinted from the star pinned to the shirt front of the man in the lead. As he came closer, McGraw saw that it was the same lawman who had

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pointed out Saunders's office to him that evening in town.

VII

WHIRLING up to the house in a flurry of hoofs and billowing dust, the horsemen reined in, and climbed down from their mounts. One man was armed with a rifle. The sheriff and the other two men had holstered guns swinging against their hips. They spied McGraw, and with the sheriff in the lead and his companions trudging along at his heels, came striding up to him.

"Kinda think I've seen you before, mister," the sheriff began.

"You showed me where Saunders keeps his office," McGraw answered.

"That's right." The sheriff stood facing him. The other men moved around McGraw so that there was a man on each side of him and one behind him. "I want to talk to you, mister. What's your name?"

"McGraw."

"I think maybe it'd be better if we did our talking inside," the sheriff said. "Suppose you lead the way, huh?"

McGraw turned, and the muzzle of a gun was promptly poked into his back. He gave the man holding the gun on him a hard look.

"What's the idea?" he demanded.

The man smiled thinly. "Just my way of discouraging you in case you get ideas," he drawled.

McGraw frowned. He checked the rush of angry words that surged to his lips, clamped his jaws shut, and with an unconscious squaring of his shoulders, led the way up the path, and around the house to the back door.

They trooped into the house, McGraw tight-mouthed and scowling. The man who was prodding him along with his gun was not being too gentle about it. The man with the rifle, the last to enter the house, closed the door and backed against it.

"All right, Pete," the sheriff said, and the man who had been herding McGraw ahead of him grunted and holstered his gun and backed away, halting a few steps beyond the door. When the sheriff gestured, Pete moved back against the wall. "You sit down, McGraw. We won't charge you anything extra for that."

McGraw did not answer. The sheriff shrugged. He rocked a little on his heels as he fixed his gaze on McGraw who stared back at him stonily.

"Where you from?" he finally asked.

"Oklahoma."

"That don't tell me much," the sheriff grunted. "Where in Oklahoma?"

"Northeastern part. Giddings County," McGraw told him.

"Never heard of it."

McGraw's shoulders lifted and fell. "Chances are the folks back there never heard of you, either," he said dryly.

"All these damned saddle tramps," Pete said scornfully. "They're all alike. Got big mouths and that's all. This one's bigger'n most, so he's got a bigger mouth than the others. Wallop him one, Al. Maybe that'll teach him to watch his tongue."

McGraw shot him a hard look. Pete was just above average height, pinch-faced and dark, and lean shanked.

"What the hell you lookin' at?" he demanded.

"You," McGraw answered calmly, and his lip curled. "Where I come from, we keep little weasels like you out of men's way. We don't want them trampled."

The sheriff spun around. "Stay out of this, Pete," he commanded. "This is my job, and I don't like anybody horning in on me."

Pete was motionless for a moment. He had come erect and had taken a single step away from the wall but now he leaned back against it. The sheriff turned to McGraw.

"Pretty handy with an iron, are you?" he asked, hooking his thumbs in his belt.

"Not too bad," McGraw agreed.

"And you know how to change a brand, too, huh?" the sheriff continued.

"Doesn't every ranch hand? Venting a brand ain't supposed to take any special talent."

"We're talking about you, mister," the sheriff said curtly. "Not about anybody else. You did a pretty good job of changing Buck Crowell's Diamond to Len Baird's Bar L. Not too good on some that we saw but pretty damned expert on most of the others. Who helped you run off Crowell's stock?"

"Nobody." McGraw snapped the word out.

"You mean you did it all by yourself?"

"I don't mean anything of the kind," McGraw retorted. "I never ran off anybody's stock, this Crowell's or anybody else's. And anybody who says I did is a damned liar."

The sheriff frowned. "Buck Crowell's lost some eighty-odd head," he said gruffly. "We've been chasing around, looking for them, and we found 'em less than an hour ago on the Bar L, mixed in with the regular stock. What do you know about them?"

"Make it good, saddle-bum," Pete said.

McGraw eyed him again. "I'm gonna kick your teeth in before you get out of here," he said evenly to Pete. "That's a promise."

Pete laughed, a little, raspy, dry-throated laugh. McGraw turned again to the sheriff.

"First day I was here," he related, "I had a look around. I found a bunch of Diamond brands and asked Mrs. Baird

about them. She kinda thought they were a herd her husband had bought. That was just before he hurt himself, she said. I figured that getting himself laid up was why he hadn't gotten around to changing the old brand to his own, so I told her I'd do the job for him if he wanted me to.

"You know, some owners don't give a damn, but others, the fussy kind, usually want it done some special way and they insist on 'being right there so they can see for themselves what you're doing and how."

"Go on," the sheriff said, gesturing with his right hand.

"Well, with Len so sick, I guess Mrs. Baird had other things, more important ones, on her mind, and she just forgot to ask him about those steers," McGraw continued. "I was busy around the place, so I guess I kinda forgot about it, too. Anyway, it wasn't till just the other day when I found myself with some free time on my hands that I thought about it again.

"First I was going to ride back here and ask Len, but being that the doctor was due here that day, I decided it wasn't the time to go bothering Len. I never had any reason to think that those steers mightn't be his, so I took a chance on going ahead with the job, hauled out the irons, and went to work. Did about half of it that afternoon and the rest of it the next day. That's all I know about those steers, Sheriff. Can't tell you any more because I don't know any more."

THE sheriff said darkly, "Well, if that herd didn't belong to Len Baird, how do you think it got here?"

"You got me," McGraw answered.

"Now, flannel mouth, you know better'n that," Pete said scornfully. "You ran off Crowell's stock and you know it."

McGraw pretended he hadn't heard him. He held his gaze on the sheriff who was standing squarely in front of him. But the sheriff spun around to Pete.

"Al, you know Crowell don't buy any stock less it's got wings and can fly," Pete said with a thin grin. "This herd got tired of living on Buck's place and flew over here. That's what happened. Couldn't have been any other way—could it?"

The sheriff was scowling. "Doggone you, Pete," he sputtered. "Why in hell don't you—" He stopped abruptly when there was a beat of hoofs outside. "All right, Pete," he said curtly. "See if that's Buck. He's probably been hunting for us and followed us here."

The man with the rifle moved away from the door, and Pete, hitching up his levis, trudged out. The sheriff, silent now, rocked back and forth on his heels.

"Sheriff," McGraw said, and the lawman looked at him, "Len was supposed to get some medicine at eight, and it must be way past that now. All right if I go up and give it to him and come right down again?"

"He's waited for it this long," the sheriff answered, "he can wait a mite longer."

"All right," McGraw said. "You're the boss."

They heard footsteps outside and voices. The door opened presently, and Pete and another man came into the house. The newcomer was stocky and middle-aged.

"Understand from Pete you found my stock, Al, and caught up with the feller who ran it off," he said at once. He stopped and raised his eyes to McGraw and glowered at him. "This the feller?"

"That's him, all right, Buck," Pete said, moving away to the wall and backing against it.

"Just a minute now," the sheriff commanded. He turned again to McGraw. "How come you're supposed to give Len his medicine? Why ain't his wife doing it?"

"She isn't here," McGraw explained.

"You don't say! You mean she's got more important things to tend to?"

"She had to go to town," McGraw replied. "Some business for Len."

"What do you say, Al?" Crowell asked. "How about somebody showing me where my stock is so I can get it the hell away from here? I've got things to do, you know."

Again there was the beat of horses' hoofs outside and the rumble of wheels.

"Take a look outside, Pete," the sheriff directed, "and see who this is. Probably Sally Baird."

"Can't be her yet," McGraw said. "She had to go to the bank, and it's just about opening now."

Pete tramped out, and there was silence in the room. Buck Crowell, having stepped away from the door to permit Pete to pass, moved around the room to the stove. He stared hard at McGraw, and the latter stared back at him. There were footsteps outside and indistinct voices, and as everyone turned toward the door, it opened and Pete came in.

"It's Dr. Fisher," he announced, holding the door wide.

The doctor entered and stopped just inside the doorway. He looked surprised. He shuttled his bespectacled gaze from one man to the other.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," he said.

Pete grinned at him. "Course not, Doc," he said. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

The doctor did not answer him. He looked at the sheriff.

"Am I permitted to go upstairs to see my patient?" he asked.

"Course, Doc," the sheriff responded quickly.

"Thank you."

VIII

BESTOWING a lingering and wondering look on McGraw as he came abreast of him, the doctor passed him and went out of the room and took the stairs to the upper floor. They heard his step faintly overhead.

"What do you say, Al?" Crowell asked again. "It's getting late. Usually by this time of day, I've got a good part of my work done. I'm way behind today."

"Just a minute, Buck," the sheriff answered. "McGraw: I think you'd better go along with—"

He was interrupted by a sudden rush of footsteps overhead and an anguished cry from the doctor.

"Sheriff! Sheriff Clune!"

"Now what?" the lawman mumbled. He turned on his heel and trudged heavily to the connecting doorway, cleared his throat, and called, "Yeah?"

"Will you come up here, please?" Fisher called.

"I'm busy, Doc. Can't it wait a few minutes?"

"No! You'd better get right up here!" Fisher insisted.

"Oh, all right," the sheriff answered. "If it's that important." The sheriff turned his head. "You fellers stay put here," he ordered. "I'll be right back."

He stalked out, mounted the stairs to the second floor.

"H'm," Pete said in a musing tone. "Wonder what that was all about? The doc sounded kind of excited."

"Damnedest slowpoke," Crowe muttered.

"Take it easy, Buck," Pete told him. "You'll last longer."

Crowell gave him an angry look. "That's for you and him, not for me," he retorted. "I've got other things to do besides spend my whole morning waiting here for a sheriff who doesn't seem to realize the world isn't standing still just because he is!"

There was movement on the stairs and all eyes were focused on the doorway. The stairs creaked under the weight of the two men who came down. The sheriff, looking grim, came into the kitchen, the doctor following him.

"I'll do the talking, huh, Doc?" the sheriff asked.

"You're the law," the doctor answered. The sheriff coughed. "McGraw, when'd you give Len his medicine last?"

"I didn't," McGraw answered. "Never gave it to him before, so there couldn't have been any last time."

The sheriff looked a little taken aback. "Well, let's see now. Oh, yeah. When was the last time you were up in Len's room?"

"The first and only time was the first day I came to work here," McGraw answered. "Len wanted to see me, so I went up."

"And that was the only time?" the sheriff insisted.

"That's right," McGraw said. "The only time."

The sheriff turned to the doctor. "What'd you think, Doc?"

"McGraw," the doctor began, "you say you were to give Len his medicine this morning. Who asked you to do that? Sally?"

McGraw answered with a nod.

"Where is the medicine you were to give him?" Dr. Fisher asked.

"Supposed to be on the bureau next to his bed."

DIGGING in his pocket, the doctor produced a small bottle and held it up for McGraw to see. It was about half filled with a rather thick brownish liquid.

"Is this what you were to give him?" he asked.

"I wouldn't know, Doc," McGraw answered simply. "If that was on the bureau, then that must be it."

The doctor uncorked the bottle and stepped forward with it. "Smell this," he commanded.

He handed the bottle to McGraw who held it to his nose, sniffed it once, twice, and handed it back.

"Well?" the doctor asked.

"Smells something like the stuff I've been using around the barn."

"It's been mixed with the medicine I prescribed for Len," the doctor said.

"Rat poison?" McGraw asked.

"Exactly," the doctor said. "Want to go on from there, Sheriff?"

Clune held out his hand, and the doctor corked the bottle and passed it to him. Clune raised his eyes to McGraw.

"Ever see this bottle before?" he asked.

"Nope." McGraw shook his head.

"Ever bring any rat poison into the house?" Clune went on.

McGraw shook his head again.

The sheriff asked, "Where'd you keep the stuff ordinarily?"

"On a shelf in the barn," McGraw answered.

"When'd you buy it?" was the next question.

"I didn't buy it. Somebody else must've. I found it on the shelf when I was cleaning out the barn."

"And you knew what it was, huh?" the sheriff growled.

"Sure," McGraw replied without hesitation. "I've used rat poison before. Guess everybody knows the stuff, because there was always some of it around every place I've ever worked."

"Who knew about this stuff being around besides you?" Clune asked.

"The one who bought it, that's for sure. But—" McGraw shrugged — "whoever else knew about it, I wouldn't know."

Clune changed his line of questioning. "McGraw, how'd you get along with Len Baird?"

"All right."

"Then you wouldn't have had any

reason for killin' him?"

McGraw started. "You mean — he's dead?"

"Dead as he'll ever be," Sheriff Clune answered. "And he didn't just die, even though the Doc says he would've in another couple of months. He was poisoned, and this stuff in the bottle, the rat poison mixed with his medicine, is what did it. You're sure you didn't have any run-ins with Len? Any trouble of any kind with him?"

"I'm sure," McGraw said emphatically.

Pete suddenly came forward to the sheriff's side, turned his back on McGraw, and whispered to Clune. Finished, he returned to his position against the wall, crossing his feet and hooking his thumbs in his belt. McGraw glanced at him. Pete avoided his eyes by putting his head back and looking up at the ceiling.

"McGraw," Sheriff Clune said, and McGraw's head jerked up. "Did you get along all right with Mrs. Baird?"

So that was the course the sheriff's questioning would take now! It was obviously Pete who had suggested it to him.

"I get along with her," McGraw answered steadily.

"Is there anything between you two?"

McGraw scowled. "No!" he flung at the sheriff.

"All right," Clune said mildly. "I was only asking. Course somebody might wonder, you know, if they happened to see her riding in front of you on your horse, and with her kinda laying back against you instead of sitting straight up. You got to admit it ain't every ranch hand that has his boss's wife riding with him that way. So it ought not surprise you none if folks get to wondering."

McGraw held his tongue. He would explain nothing, volunteer nothing. There were things he could have told them, but he decided to keep them to himself, at least for the time being. This wasn't the time for them, nor the place. The door opened suddenly, and everyone turned.

Sally Baird was framed in the doorway. Her eyes ranged over the men in the room. The color drained out of her face. Fear showed in her eyes.

"What—what is it?" she asked falteringly. "What's happened? Why are you

all here and why are you standing around like this?"

Her eyes held on the doctor. It was the sheriff who cleared his throat and answered.

"Sorry to have to tell you this, Sally," he said. "Len's dead."

She gasped, and the sheriff added bluntly, "He was poisoned."

"Poisoned?" she repeated. Her expression reflected disbelief. "Oh, you must be mistaken!"

"No," Clune said. "Somebody mixed rat poison in his medicine."

She gasped again. Her gaze shifted and fixed itself on McGraw. There were tears in her eyes.

"Frank!" she cried, and McGraw felt his face redden. "How could you do such an awful thing? And after you promised me you wouldn't do anything like that!"

She bowed her head and pressed her hands to her mouth and sobbed quietly, her whole body heaving.

"Oh, my poor Len! My poor Len!"

She moved suddenly with a catapulting rush that carried her across the room to the connecting door where the doctor caught her in his arms and stopped her.

"Len!" she screamed, struggling to free herself.

But the doctor held her firmly, and after a moment, she stopped struggling and bowed her head on his chest.

"I was so lonely and he took advantage of it and made love to me," she sobbed brokenly. "I know I shouldn't have let him but I wasn't strong enough to stop him. He wanted me to go away with him. But I couldn't leave Len. I put him off. I told him Len didn't have very much longer to live and that we'd talk about it afterward."

"He didn't agree right away, but I pleaded with him, and he finally agreed to wait. It came to a head last night. He wouldn't wait any longer. I begged him to be patient. He got nasty with me, and I told him to get out. He wanted money."

"When I refused him, he threatened to go to Len and tell him the most awful things about me. I bought him off for five hundred dollars. He agreed to take the money and go away. That's what I went to the bank for this morning. To get him the money so I could be rid of him."

"You shoulda come to me, Sally, and told me what was going on," Clune said grimly. "I'd have taken care of him for you, good and proper."

"I was afraid to tell anyone," Sally murmured.

The sheriff gave McGraw a hard look. "All right, you," he said curtly. "Let's go."

"What about me, Al?" Crowell asked. "What about my stock? What am I supposed to do?"

Clune turned again to Sally.

"Sally," he said. "We found a bunch of Buck Crowell's steers in with yours. Know anything about them?"

She raised her head. "Yes," she answered. "I knew McGraw was running off Crowell's stock, changing the Diamond to the Bar L brand, and that he was planning to steal more cattle from other outfits. When I protested, he told me to mind my own business, and said he'd fix me good if I dared tell anyone."

Pete came erect, shifted his holster a bit.

"Moved right in on you and took over the place, huh?" he said.

"Just about," Sally said.

"The skunk," Pete said, shaking his head. "Got more gall than anybody I ever heard tell of." He walked to the door. "What do you say, Al?"

"Yeah," Crowell added. "How 'bout it, huh?"

"Blix," the sheriff said, and the man with the rifle looked up. "Blix, how 'bout you showing Buck where he can find his stock? You might give him a hand cutting his steers out and getting them started for his place."

Blix nodded and followed Crowell out of the house.

"All right, McGraw," Clune said. "Let's go."

Pete jerked out his gun and stepped back. When McGraw came up to the door, Pete dug his gun in McGraw's back and prodded him out.

IX

PENDING release of transfer to the county seat for trial, lawbreakers were usually locked in the cellar under Sheriff Clune's office. There were no windows to provide a means of escape, and the

door at the top of a flight of rickety wooden stairs that opened into the sheriff's back room which served as his living quarters, was bolted. A nailed up back door and an iron barred window offered little to anyone who managed to escape from the cellar.

A sturdy bolted door that could be opened only from the office, or by a key from the back room, separated the two cubicles. But because Clune had some other equally urgent business to attend to that particular morning, McGraw was lodged in the back room.

Prevailing upon Pete to give him a little more of his time and stand guard over the premises till he returned, Clune hustled out.

McGraw was in a bad spot. That he would wind up with a rope around his neck appeared to be a foregone conclusion. Sally held the key to the situation and only she could save him. But there was, he knew, little likelihood that she would do anything voluntarily to stop his march.

He paced the floor, cursing inwardly and grinding his big right fist into the palm of his left hand. He looked about him and his angry eyes held on the connecting door. It offered him his only chance. If he could get through it safely and then to Sally, that was all he would ask. He'd get the truth out of her if he had to choke it out.

He stepped to the door and banged on it.

"Hey, Sheriff!" he called, pretending he didn't know that Clune had gone off. There was a long silence, then Pete called, "Sheriff ain't here."

"Oh," McGraw said, trying to sound disappointed. "Hey, how 'bout something to eat? Just coffee'd do for now. I haven't had anything since last night, and my belly feels like it's laying against my backbone."

Pete scowled. "Can't you wait till the sheriff gets back?"

"Depends on how long you figure that'll be," McGraw said.

"Couple hours, more or less."

"Hey, that's a hell of a note!" McGraw protested. "I'm plumb empty."

There was another brief silence, then Pete asked, "You got dough to pay for it?"

"Sure," McGraw said quickly.

"All right. I'll get you something," Pete agreed.

There was the sound of a chair being pushed back, and footsteps came to the door. The door was opened, and Pete looked in.

"Where's the dough?" he asked.

McGraw held it out to him, but Pete made no move to take it.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Most anything will do," McGraw told him, "long as you get coffee with it. Get something for yourself, too."

Pete shook his head. "Don't want anything."

McGraw shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said. "But if you change your mind, all right. Hey, maybe I'd better give you another buck just in case, huh?"

HE DUG in his pocket and produced another silver dollar and held out the money. Pete reached for it mechanically and just a little too carelessly. It gave McGraw the opportunity he sought, and he took full advantage of Pete's lapse.

As Pete leaned in, McGraw leaped at him. His attack was so swift and so overwhelming that Pete never had a chance. McGraw's clawing left hand clamped around Pete's gun wrist, preventing Pete from drawing.

They struck at each other, but McGraw's punch carried the greater authority. It exploded in Pete's face with stunning force, staggering him, and when he floundered and his legs buckled, McGraw snatched the gun out of Pete's holster and shoved it into his own belt.

Disregarding Pete's flailing arms, McGraw grabbed Pete by the shirt front and dragged him over the threshold, spun him around, and sent him careening against the cellar door. Pete struck it with a body jarring thud.

As McGraw swarmed after him and closed with him, Pete brought up his right knee viciously and caught McGraw in the groin. But instead of doubling up and backing off, McGraw fell against him and clung to him and, despite Pete's frantic efforts to free himself, held him pinned against the door. McGraw recovered quickly from the effect of the kneeling and in an exchange of blows rocked Pete and made his legs buckle again.

He gave Pete no respite. He pulled him

away from the door, yanked it open and spun Pete through the doorway and gave him a full-armed shove. There was a cry from the hapless Pete as he lost his balance and hurtled down the stairs. McGraw, panting and wheezing, slammed the door shut, bolted it, and ran into the office, slamming the connecting door shut, too. A moment later he was looking cautiously out the street door.

Two horses were tied at the hitch-rail directly in front of the sheriff's office. One of them, McGraw saw, was his own. He took it for granted that the other was Pete's. He pushed Pete's gun more securely in his belt. There was normal activity in the street, wagons, buckboards, and some horsemen moving past him in both directions. There were some passersby too, women mostly, and they glanced at him disinterestedly as they went by.

Diagonally across the street, a storekeeper struggling with a stack of empty boxes suddenly tripped and sprawled on the sidewalk, the boxes flying in all directions. Men and women alike hurried to help him to his feet.

McGraw, taking advantage of the fact that everyone's interest and attention was centered on the hapless storekeeper, stepped out of the doorway, drew the door shut behind him, and strode briskly to the curb. He untied his horse, swung on, rode up the street at a lope. When he reached the far corner and wheeled onto the eastward road, he lashed his mount into a furious gallop.

The road was deserted, and McGraw was glad of it. He would have a better chance if he could avoid being seen. He wondered, however, if it wouldn't have been smarter to have ridden westward at first and then doubled back around the town to reach the Bar L road instead of heading at once for the Baird place. Now, because he hadn't covered his tracks, he would have to work swiftly to avoid untimely interruption and recapture.

X

UNDER the furious beat of his mount's pounding hoofs, the miles slipped away. On and on they went, first over the open road, then over a stretch of tree-shaded roadway, then they burst out of it and again into the sunlit open. A hundred feet

from the entrance to the Bar L, McGraw pulled his panting horse to a sliding stop and swung down. He led the horse off the road and into some grass that fringed it and left him there, blowing himself.

McGraw scurried away, seeking an opening or a break-through in the tall brush that shut the Bar L from the road. He found a gap in the brush shortly and pushed through to an embankment, climbed it, and came to higher ground. He stopped and looked about him. The barn, rearing itself skyward, stood between him and the ranch house, screening him from the house.

Wheezing a little, he darted away through the grass, cutting through it diagonally to reach the barn. He came up to it after a bit and stumbled to a stop and huddled against the side wall. After a minute, when he had got his breath, he moved along the wall to the end of it and peered out cautiously. A saddled horse wearing a Bar B brand on its hip was idling in front of the barn.

The Bar B! That was Ben Baird's brand. It meant that Ben was in the house. McGraw frowned. He was not concerned with what had brought Ben to the house. He had hoped to be able to confront Sally without interference. The burly Baird would have to be dealt with before he could hope to get to Sally.

McGraw hadn't forgotten the shot fired at him that dark night and he felt he owed Ben something for it, but this was not the time to make repayment. However, it would make dealing with Ben and disposing of him that much more enjoyable.

The idling horse moved and McGraw caught sight of a buckboard. He recognized it at once as the doctor's. His frown deepened. It was an odd trio—Sally, Ben Baird, and the doctor—and McGraw wondered about them. He brought his conjecturing to an abrupt halt. He had things to do, and every minute's delay meant less time for him in which to do them.

He backed and retraced his steps along the wall, rounded the towering rear wall, and followed it to its end, bending low when he moved past the barn into the open. There he got down on his hands and knees and crawled through the grass that ran along the path. A wall of thin brush rose up at the edge of the grass. He moved closer to it and crawled along

it and stopped when he looked up and saw that he had passed the house. He went back, still on his hands and knees, and peered through the brush. There was no sign of anyone. He sank down for a moment to plan a course of action. He'd get rid of the doctor first, he told himself. Then he would give his fullest attention to Ben Baird. He got up again and, crouching, parted the brush with his hands.

"But, Ben," another voice, Sally Baird's, said, and McGraw scowled, "how can you prevent it?"

"How?" Ben repeated. He laughed annoyingly. "That's easy. Leastways it is, when you know how, and believe me, I know how. I'll be in town tonight and I'll buy drinks where they'll do the most good. Tomorrow you'll hear that a bunch of fired-up men busted into the sheriff's office, hauled out that McGraw, and

THE INDIAN SIGN



PHILOLOGISTS conjecture that the manual or sign language predates human speech. The American Indian tribes used this speech to converse inter-tribally, and all white trappers and mountain men soon became versed in its use. One gesture might stand for a whole sentence: the right hand raised and slowly moved from right to left meant, "Who are you?"

Also, each Indian tribe could be designated by a single significant gesture. The symbol for the Sioux was drawing the finger across the throat as in the sweep of a knife. The Arapahoes, or "Smellers," were indicated by seizing the nose in the grip of thumb and forefinger. The Comanche-sign

was the waving of the hand to imitate the crawling of a reptile. The Cheyennes or "Cut-arms" by drawing a finger across an arm. The Pawnees were "Wolves" in the Western sign language: placing a forefinger on each side of the forehead to imitate the pointed ears of the wolf. The "Crow" sign was the clapping of hands in a way to imitate flapping wings.

Women were indicated by moving the hand down toward the shoulder as if combing long hair. And white men by drawing the finger over the forehead in suggestion of a hat.

If two tribes happened to meet, and received from each other the friendship sign: the raised hands clasped, forefingers locked, instead of the enemy sign of the shut hand against the forehead, they could exchange news and gossip in dumb show. No word, or no more than a grunt, would be uttered, but the two tribes comprehended each other perfectly. And even when members of the same tribe conversed, the expressive sign language was called upon to make plain the speaker's meaning when he just couldn't think of the right word.

The mountain men found this language a convenience; but they always informed newcomers in their company that the safest word to know was the gesture of raising a gun to the shoulder—providing that one reinforced this motion by a visible firearm.

—Doris E. Pogue

Bending low, he eased himself through it and stepped out in the path. He looked up. The kitchen window was almost directly opposite. He crossed the path and flattened out against the side of the house and sidled up to the window. It was open at the bottom. The murmur of voices drifted out to him. He moved a little closer to it in order to hear better.

"If that's all that's troubling you, forget it," a voice that was Ben Baird's said. "There won't be any trial."

strung him up higher'n a kite. Without a pris'ner to stand trial, there won't be any trial, will there? So quit worrying. But it still beats me why you're so concerned about them bringing McGraw to trial. The whole thing's cut and dried. He wouldn't stand a chance."

A THIRD voice, the doctor's, said, "If we can avoid a trial, so much the better, Ben. There's always a chance of something coming out that would be bet-

ter left unrevealed and untold. But getting back to your plan, it will take a great deal of persuasiveness to bring about a lynching."

"Yes," Sally said. "Particularly in this case."

"Yeah? Why?" Ben wanted to know.

"Because everyone, or practically everyone, knows you and Len weren't very brotherly," Sally answered.

"Go on," Ben urged.

"Don't you think people will wonder why you should suddenly feel so badly about Len's death?" Sally asked. "Don't you think they'll wonder if you haven't some, well, some ulterior motive for wanting his killer lynched?"

"They won't think anything," Ben replied. "I'm gonna tell them that it was all my doing, that Len and me had a falling out. And now that he's dead, what could be more natural for me to do than realize and admit the error of my ways, and tell everybody what a fine, wonderful feller Len was?"

"I'll work up from that and by the time I get done, everybody in Murphy's bar will be crying in his beer. Won't take much egging them on after that to get them to do what I want. S'matter, Doc? What are you shaking your head for?"

"I don't think much of that idea," Sally objected.

"I suppose you've got a better one?" There was a jeering note in Ben's voice.

"I have. And it's one that can't possibly miss," she assured him.

"I'm listening," Ben told her.

Sally said smoothly, "Well, if it were my brother who'd been murdered and I felt as badly about it as you want people to believe you do, I'd walk into the sheriff's office, demand to see the prisoner, and when he was brought out, I'd shoot him dead. No court in the land would convict me."

"No," Ben agreed. "But supposing I did that, killed McGraw, and afterward, instead of turning me loose, the court decided against me and I wound up in prison or at the end of a rope? What then?"

"I don't believe that would happen," Sally said. "Not for one minute."

"But it could happen, couldn't it?" he demanded. "Now that makes me wonder. You two wouldn't want something to

happen to me, would you, so you could be rid of me same's you're rid of Len?"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Ben!" Sally said. "Don't be ridiculous. Why should we want something to happen to you?"

"You'd own the whole ranch then instead of only half," Ben pointed out.

"Ben," the doctor said, "we agreed that in return for your—your silence half the ranch would go to you thirty days after Len passed away. We made the deal with you of our own free will. It seemed reasonable to us then, and it still does."

"I dunno," Ben sounded dubious. "There's something about this business that don't smell right. Look, you two—and believe me, it don't make a damned bit of difference to me either way—you didn't do the job on Len yourselves, did you?"

"Oh, Ben!" Sally cried.

"You might've," Ben went on calmly. "I dunno about you, Doc. I don't know enough about you. But I know you, Sally, and I wouldn't put anything, even a killing, past you. Hey, did all eighty-four of the steers I ran off Crowell go back to him?"

"Yes," McGraw heard Sally answer.

BEN said disgustedly, "Hell, after all the chances I took running them off Crowell's place and bringing them here. I was waiting till I had to ship out some of my own stock. Then I was gonna put Crowell's in with mine. I would've made a nice piece of dough out of the deal."

"You should have gotten rid of Crowell's right away," Sally said irritably.

"Didn't think there was such a great rush. You see, Sally, if you hadn't kept McGraw on, chances are Clune never would have come anywhere near here. He'd have figured that Crowell's steers were gone, and that woulda been that. But McGraw was a stranger 'round these parts, and Clune got suspicious of him. Otherwise he would've quit looking after the first day. Well, no use cryin' over spilt milk, I guess. I got to be going. Got things to do." Ben sounded as if he'd made up his mind.

"I wish you'd give some thought to what I suggested, Ben," the doctor said.

"I have, Doc," Ben said, "and I don't think I'm gonna do anything about McGraw. I think I'll just sit back and keep

my nose out of things. 'Fraid you two'll have to take your chances on a trial. Maybe nothing'll come out."

McGraw heard his heavy step, heard the door open, heard it close after him. He moved away from the window as Ben came, striding around the house. As he came face to face with Ben, McGraw pulled out the gun he had taken from Pete. The latter, to McGraw's surprise beckoned him away from the house. McGraw looked at him blankly, but when Ben beckoned him a second time and began to back off, he followed him, holstering the gun.

"You hear everything?" Ben asked in a hushed voice.

McGraw nodded.

"I was hoping you would," Ben continued. "When I saw you peeking in the window, I tried to lead them on, hoping they'd say even more'n they did. But it didn't work out the way I wanted it to."

"Look, what's this all about?" McGraw demanded.

"Oh, a little of everything," Ben said, "from funny business right down to and including murder."

"Go on," McGraw commanded.

XI

HITCHING up his pants, Baird took a long breath, and went on. "It all began some time ago. Sally and the doc were having what folks call an affair and they had it figured that nobody was on to them. They felt they were safe, because what they were doing they were doing right inside with nobody to see them. I busted in on them one fine day—accidental it was, too—and that's how come we made the deal for me to get half the Bar L for keeping my mouth shut.

"I wouldn't have told Len, anyway. He didn't have any use for me, and I didn't have any for him. But I sure as hell don't like the way those two have worked things, and I don't trust 'em neither."

"Why'd you try to run me off the place? Afraid I'd find out about Crowell's stock?" McGraw asked.

"Yes. But that's all I'm mixed up in, and since Crowell got his stock back, maybe the law won't go so hard on me," Ben said hopefully.

"What do you know about this poison-

ing business?" McGraw asked him.

"I know enough that can be added up to make something," Ben answered. "I didn't see you around for a couple of days. Guess you were busy or something and didn't get near the fences."

"I was busy, all right," McGraw said dryly. "Knocking myself out taking off Crowell's Diamond and putting on the Bar L."

Ben grinned a little sheepishly.

"Wait a minute, Baird," McGraw said. "Did Sally know you were trying to get rid of me?"

Ben shook his head. "I don't think so. I think the only thing she was afraid of was that I might tell you about her and the doc."

"Go on," McGraw commanded.

"I didn't see you around so I got to wondering if you'd finally quit," Ben told him. "I rode down here for a look-see. I came up to the house and started to climb down when the back door opened. I heard voices so I listened. It was Sally and the doc. They didn't see me or even know I was so close. I heard Sally say, 'Just one dose? You're sure that will do it?' The doc said, 'He'll be dead in thirty minutes. Maybe less.'"

"I made some noise then, getting down and stamping up to the door. They both looked at me kinda funny when they saw me. 'Course I didn't let on that I'd heard anything, so nothing was said. The doc went off. But I saw something in Sally's apron pocket. It was a medicine bottle with some brownish stuff in it."

"Probably the same one Doc Fisher had," McGraw put in.

"I saw something else, too—in the kitchen," Ben continued. "Sally kept edging around so's she could stand in front of it and I wouldn't see it. But I got a look at it, anyway. It was a bottle of Gay's rat poison. It was in the sink. 'Course the next time I saw it, it was back where it belonged, where it always used to be kept, on a shelf in the barn. When I heard Len had been poisoned, I could figure how it'd happened. But I went along with Sally and the doc and let 'em think I believed what they told me, that you were the one who did it. That's the story, McGraw."

"Wish to hell Cluné was here so he could have heard it."

"He'll hear it, all right," Ben assured him. "And from me. What do we do now? Go to town?"

McGraw shot a look at the house. "We could wrap up this thing if we had them with us," he answered. "Look, the law's going to need you for a witness. So I don't want to take any chances on anything happening to you. You stay out here. I'll go after them myself."

"You want to watch that Sally, McGraw," Ben advised. "She's a devil. Watch her every minute."

"I'll watch her," McGraw said grimly.

He turned away from Ben, stalked to the back door, and opened it. The doctor, grave-faced, was sitting at the table. He looked up and exclaimed, "McGraw!"

McGraw came into the kitchen. There was no sign of Sally.

"Surprised to see me, Doc?" McGraw asked.

"I—I thought you were the undertaker," the doctor faltered.

He started to get up but stopped and sank down again when McGraw gestured and asked, "Where's Sally?"

Fisher's eyes flicked upward. "Why, she's upstairs."

"Tell her to come down."

Pale and tired looking, the doctor sat motionless for a moment. Then he got up with a strange heaviness and trudged to the connecting doorway.

"Sally!" he called. There was no response. "Sally!" he called again. He looked at McGraw over his shoulder. "She doesn't answer. Perhaps I'd better go up and get her."

He tramped out of the room. McGraw, standing in the middle of the kitchen, watched him as he mounted the stairs and disappeared from view on the upper floor. McGraw heard footsteps overhead presently, heard a door open, heard the indistinct murmur of voices. There was a brief silence, then McGraw heard steps on the landing. Then the stairs creaked, and the doctor came down alone.

"She'll be down directly," he said.

"She'd better, or I'll go up after her."

McGraw turned away then and sauntered around the room. When he came to the table, he stopped and looked down at it, studied the lace doily in the middle of the checkered cloth. There was move-

ment behind him, and he wheeled around. The doctor was backing toward the door.

"Hold it, Doc," he commanded.

There was a sudden deafening roar of gunfire from the direction of the stairway, and McGraw yanked the gun out of his belt as he wheeled to answer. Another shot, this one from somewhere near the door, tore his hat off his head, and he turned and snapped a reply.

The doctor, gun in hand, gasped and tottered, dropped his gun and fell. There was a rush of booted feet outside, the door was flung open, and men burst into the house, wide-eyed, excited men. Sheriff Clune and Pete were among them. They looked down at the crumpled figure on the floor, then lifted their eyes to McGraw. There was a cry from the hallway and swift, running steps, and Sally Baird came racing into the kitchen.

"Thank God you came back, Sheriff! And just in time, too. If you hadn't, I don't know what might have happened. He—he was a madman." She pointed to the doctor. "He wanted to kill. First Len, then McGraw. He made me give Len the medicine. He made me—"

"Yeah, sure, Sally," Clune said, interrupting her. "Funny how everybody makes you do things, huh? You all right, McGraw?"

McGraw had picked up his hat. There was a bullet hole at the very top of the crown. He poked his finger through it.

"I'm all right, Sheriff. But just an inch lower and I wouldn't have been. Where's Ben Baird? Have you seen him?"

The sheriff jerked his head. "He's outside. He told us everything he knew."

"That and what Sally just spilled clears me, doesn't it?" McGraw asked.

"Yeah, I think so. Want to give you a tip, though, McGraw. Next job you take, make sure about folks you're going to work for. You might hire out to another Sally Baird, and your luck might run out on you."

McGraw smiled. "No chance of that, Sheriff. No more drifting for me. I'm through. I've had enough. I'm heading back to Oklahoma where I know everybody and everybody knows me."

The sheriff nodded and turned back to Sally.

"Come on," he commanded. "I'm gonna lock you up before somebody else makes

you do something you don't want to do. Fact is, I think we'll take you right straight to the county seat. The judge'll be glad to see you. He likes people who are always doing things. He's got a nice, new prison and not enough customers to fill it up. 'Less I miss my guess, he'll like you so much, he'll probably fix it so you can stay there for a long, long time. Come on. We don't want to keep the judge waiting."

HE TOOK her by the arm and led her out. Men moved aside, opening a path for them, then with a backward glance at the huddled figure on the floor, trooped out after them.

Only Pete remained. His face was battered. His lips were puffed and swollen, his jaw was red and scraped looking, and was a greenish tinge under one eye.

"Sorry, Pete," McGraw said.

"So am I," Pete retorted.

He dug in his pocket and produced a silver dollar and tossed it to McGraw.

"Gave you two of them," the latter said in mild protest. "Where's the other one?"

"I'm keeping it. I'm entitled to something, ain't I?"

There was a brief silence, then McGraw asked, "How's your appetite, Pete?"

"All right," the deputy said.

"Jaw hurt you too much to eat?" When Pete shook his head, McGraw said, "Come on, then. Just to show you I'm a regular feller, I'll buy you the best doggoned meal in town before I ride out."

McGraw hitched up his levis, jerked down the brim of his hat, and came across the room to the door. Pete didn't move, and McGraw looked at him questioningly.

"Ain't you forgetting something?" Pete asked, pointing to the gun that was jutting out of McGraw's belt.

"Hey, that's right," McGraw said. "That's yours, isn't it?"

"Well, now that you mention it—" Pete began.

"Hell," McGraw said, "what's yours is yours, you know."

He pulled the gun out of his belt and handed it to Pete who shoved it into his empty holster. Pete opened the door, held it for McGraw, and followed him out.



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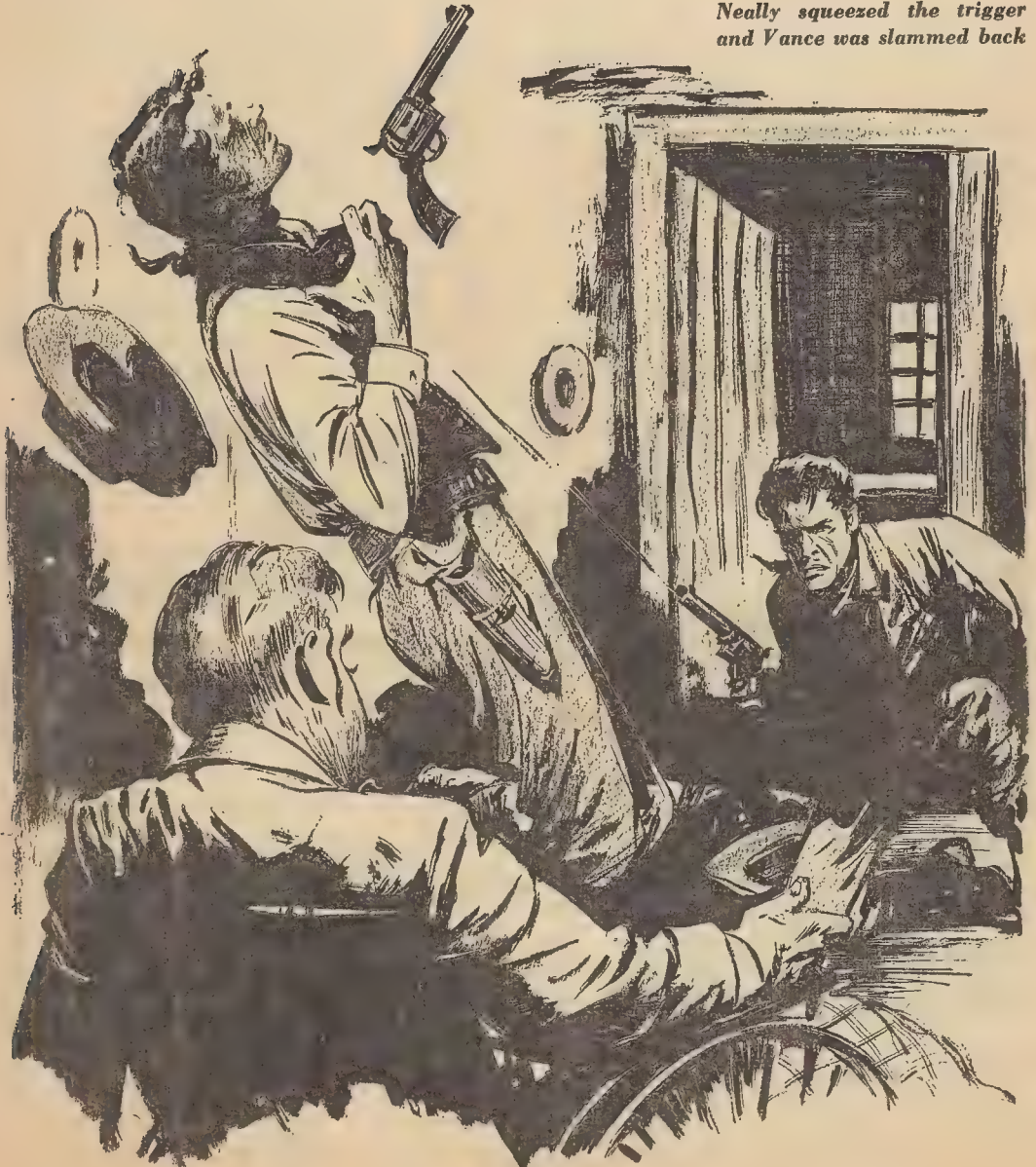
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Syndicate Man

*Neally squeezed the trigger
and Vance was slammed back*



A Novel by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

*They said he was a lonely man, a killer with a
fast gun, a man without soul or conscience—
but only Dan Neally knew how wrong they were!*



I

DAN NEALLY was a lonely man. His reputation decreed it. A driving man, a killer with a fast gun, a brutal fighter with his fists, a man without soul and without conscience, a perfect trouble shooter for a cattle syndicate. That was what they said about Dan Neally in Colorado where he had lived most of his thirty years, and only Dan Neally knew how wrong they were. Circumstances laid the framework of a man's reputation; long tongues

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built a high scaffold on it.

Oregon was a long way from New Mexico and Colorado, too far for a reputation to go, and Neally hated being lonely. That was why he had listened when Clint Walsh, general manager of the Far Western Land and Cattle Company, had gone to Denver to offer him a proposition.

"Anchor T owns Blackbow Basin," Walsh had said. "There are a few shirttail outfits around it, but no reason for trouble. All you've got to do is take over and run it. Hold what we've got. Show a profit. That's what the boys in Boston want to see."

There had been time to think about it on the way to Canyon City and on to the Blackbow, and with the passage of time a vague uneasiness had grown in Neally. Something was wrong that he couldn't quite put his finger on. His tough reputation had been his big asset in Colorado but it wouldn't be in Oregon where he had never been heard of. Yet when he had told Walsh his price—and he had put the figure high—the Far Western man had nodded agreement without argument. That was queer, too, for it wasn't a syndicate's way to spend a nickel it didn't have to.

The stage wheeled out of the pines, hit the floor of the basin, and lined out for Red Bend on a road that cut across the flat like an uncurved ribbon. The basin was a cowman's paradise. Neally had never seen anything like it. A meandering line of willows to his right marked a stream. Rimrock made a natural barrier to the east, south, and west. Somewhere beyond those cliffs would be the shirttail outfits Clint Walsh had mentioned.

"Hold what we've got. Show a profit." Those were Walsh's orders, and it looked to Neally as if geography had made it simple, so simple that a high-priced, fighting ramrod seemed an unnecessary expense. Uneasiness grew in him. A man had a right to know what he was heading into, but Clint Walsh hadn't faced his cards.

THE stage was in Red Bend then. Not much of a town. The bigger buildings crowded the four corners: two saloons, a hotel, and the mercantile. A few other false-fronted structures were scattered along the street; some dwellings fringed the business block. No, not much of a

burg, Neally thought as he stepped down, but the only town within a hundred miles.

Neally waited at the rear boot for his luggage, eying the street and thinking it odd that there was no one in sight when a dozen horses were racked in front of the Hoof and Horn Saloon. Every cowtown he had seen made an occasion out of the stage's arrival.

Shrugging, Neally picked up his war-bag and sacked saddle as the coach rolled down the street. Maybe Oregon was different. Maybe folks out here didn't give a—

"Stand pat," a cold voice called from the hotel door. "Put your stuff down. Then hook the moon. Don't make any funny moves, unless you want a dose of buckshot in your back."

Neally obeyed without question. Before his hands were up even with his shoulders, he was aware of men boiling into the street from the mercantile, the hotel, the Hoof and Horn. Angry men, guns palmed, their patched and faded clothes evidence that they were the shirttail cowmen Walsh had mentioned.

"He ain't so tough," one taunted. "A tough hand would be burning powder by now."

They made a circle that tightened until within half a dozen paces of him. One said, "Watch him, Mort. If Far Western's aiming to crowd us, they wouldn't send a man here who wasn't tough."

The man called Mort was young, a string bean with muddy brown eyes set astride a great beak of a nose and a thin-lipped mouth that held a cruel smile. He was the only one, Neally saw, who wore good clothes. His black stetson alone was worth the price of all the other tattered outfits piled together.

He held a black-butted .44. and another was cased on his left hip. He was a killer who would not be particular whether he shot a man in the front or the back. A strange one, Neally thought, to be in this bunch.

They crowded closer, eyes fixed warily on Neally as if afraid, even with the dozen guns covering him. Mort said, "Take his iron, Link. Then we'll show him how we handle a Colorado tough. Next time Far Western will let Okeson run Anchor T."

The man who had said Far Western wouldn't send a man who wasn't tough

stepped slowly toward Neally. He was heavy and middle-aged, with a square, practical face, an honest and careful man who was doing something, Neally thought, that didn't fully meet with his approval but was being driven to it by a desperate need. He lifted Neally's gun and moved back quickly, a long, relieved breath breaking out of him.

Mort slipped his gun into leather, the sly smile a steady lengthening of his lips. "They couldn't be satisfied with what Oke-son's making for 'em, could they? They've got to squeeze out a little more blood. Well, they ain't going to get our blood, Mr. Neally. You go back and tell Clint Walsh that, only you'll have to tell him who you are, 'cause he won't recognize your mug when I get done."

He held up his left hand, showing Neally a ring on his finger with a sharp-edged gold nugget.

"I like to mark a man," Mort said with obvious relish. "I save my right for gun work."

Mort let drive with his left. Neally, twisting sharply and turning his head, took the blow on his shoulder.

Mort cursed. "Hold still, or I'll use a gun barrel on your head."

"You've had your fun," a woman called. "That's enough!"

MORT wheeled toward the mercantile. The woman stood under the wooden awning, a cocked shotgun held on the ready. She was about twenty, Neally guessed, tall and round-bodied, with a generous mouth and dark brown hair that was pinned loosely on the back of her head.

"Get out of it, Ann," Mort called thickly. "This is no business of yours."

"Trouble won't help any of us," the woman said quietly. "Give him his gun, Link, then drift."

"You don't know what he'll do," Mort cried. "You trying to help your pa grab our spreads?"

"No, and I don't know what Neally's planning on but I do know you'll force him to do the worst he can. Let's give him a chance."

"Chance, hell. We ain't gonna stand for his being in the basin."

The woman stepped into the street. "I don't want to hurt you, Mort, so I'm tell-

ing you now to get out of town."

"Reckon we'd better," Link said somberly. "Ann Ryan's the kind who'll pull that trigger."

Still Mort hesitated. The rest began drifting toward their horses as Link spilled the shells from Neally's gun into his hand and handed the Colt to Neally as gingerly as he had taken it.

He said darkly, "If you're smart, you'll get. We don't want you here. Neither does Jess Okeson and the rest of the Anchor T boys."

He strode quickly to his horse. Mort was watching the girl, his narrow face ugly. He said, "I ain't gonna forget this, Ann."

Wheeling, he strode to his black and mounted. They quit town at a high run, Mort leading the cavalcade, dust puffs rising and rolling back.

Neally stuffed new loads into the cylinders as he crossed the street to the mercantile. He was wide-shouldered and lanky with the lean hips and flat muscles of a hard-riding man. He took off his hat and brushed a hand through short black hair, feeling his gratitude but finding a difficulty in putting it into words.

"I reckon you kept me from getting a beating. I'm obliged. If I can—"

She had been studying him closely, gray eyes marked by uncertainty. "There's one thing you can do, Mr. Neally. Give these men a little luck. I didn't take a hand in this because I love Far Western or Clint Walsh. A syndicate doesn't have a soul. Perhaps Walsh doesn't, either, but I'm hoping you do."

He stood awkwardly, puzzling over what she had said. She was plain of face, but he sensed a genuine sweetness about her, a frank honesty that he admired and had found in few women.

He said, "Looks like those boys can make their own luck. How did they know my name and when I was arriving in town?"

"Why—I don't know. They were talking about it two or three days ago."

"They seemed to think I'm a tough hand."

"Aren't you?"

He started to say no and changed his mind.

"Some folks say so. But thanks for pulling the pack off. I won't forget I owe you a favor."

II

PICKING up his warbag and saddle, Neally turned to the livery stable beyond the Hoof and Horn. Judging by the way his name and reputation had preceded him, it wasn't as far from Colorado to Blackbow Basin as he had thought. Everybody in the valley had judged him before they'd seen him, Neally thought, as he saddled a bay gelding.

Mounting, he took the east road out of town to the Anchor T. They were flat, monotonous miles, exactly like the country he had traversed earlier that day. He pounded across the plank bridge spanning Blackbow Creek and came presently within sight of the Anchor T buildings.

Anchor T was set close to the east side of the basin. The house was a white frame building of two stories. There was the usual array of barns and outbuildings and corrals and a row of thin-bodied poplars across the front. Neally sensed an atmosphere of neatness and efficiency about the place that set it apart from most syndicate ranches which were run on the premise that a dollar today is worth more than the two dollars tomorrow which could be earned by a little foresight and extra care.

Ann Ryan had said that syndicates didn't have souls. That was right, often enough, so often that Neally had quit more than one job because he couldn't stomach the way the big boys played, a fact that somehow never got spread around with the more colorful part of his record.

There was no sign of life about the place. Uneasiness traveled along Neally's spine again. Walsh had said that a man named Jess Okeson was rodding the outfit and he had promised to get word to Okeson when Neally would be in Red Bend so that one of the hands could meet him.

Dismounting, Neally racked his mount at the gnawed hitch-rail in front of the house and moved warily across the bare earth yard. Jess Okeson might want to keep his job, and if Neally disappeared, it would be a long time before the Far Western Land and Cattle Company would hear about it.

"Come in, Mr. Neally." A girl stood in the doorway, a shotgun held on the ready. "Make any kind of a move that doesn't look right, and I'll blow you apart."

Blackbow Basin women had a grim af-

fection for shotguns, Neally thought as he stepped across the porch and went into the house. The girl backed away, watching him closely, and motioned to a leather chair that stood against the outside wall.

It was a big, comfortable room with a stone fireplace at one end, rag rugs on the floor, a crude pine table in the center, and a scattering of home-made chairs. A door at the west end of the room opened into what was evidently the office. Neally could see the rolltop desk, the swivel chair, and a horsehair couch covered by a litter of bridles, blankets, and odds and ends of leather.

"Put your hands in front of you," the girl said soberly. "You think you're home but you're wrong. You'll slope back to town. Then you'll keep on going."

Neally obeyed, his long body slack in the chair, and his straight mouth a sober line across his dark face. He thought, "Damn Clint Walsh. Why didn't he tell me what I was getting into?"

"I'm Judy Sanger," the girl said. "Link Sanger is my father. Our S Star is the biggest ranch on the rim. There are about fifteen spreads around the basin, ten-cow outfits that will never be any bigger, even if they keep on using the valley that's theirs as much as it is Anchor T's. We don't propose to lose that grass, Neally. You and all the rest of the gunslingers Clint Walsh sends out here can't keep us from getting it. That's the story, mister. Got anything to say?"

"No."

NEALLY reached for tobacco and paper, taking his time with the cigarette as he looked at the girl. She was about eighteen, he judged, small and proud, with a heart-shaped face that would stay in a man's dreams long after she had forgotten him. Her hair was more red than brown and held a rebellious curl that gave it a wild appearance of disarray as if she seldom combed it. Her eyes were blue and disconcertingly sharp.

She was wearing levis and a man's faded blue shirt that was open at the neck, a bold and striking girl who had dealt herself into a tough game, and Dan Neally had a hunch that she was tough enough to stay in.

"Then you can mount up and hit for town. Go back and tell Walsh that Jess

Okeson is getting along all right."

Neally lighted his cigarette. He said then, "Before I go, I've got a question or two. Did Okeson leave you here to give me a shotgun reception?"

She glanced nervously toward the door. "No. He doesn't know I'm here."

"Then why are you here?"

"I know the kind of man you are," she said bluntly, "and I know why you came. I'd rather kill you than let you turn Anchor T loose on us and our neighbors."

He asked softly, "What kind of man am I?"

"You wouldn't like it if I told you."

"I'll listen."

"You're a killer," she said hotly. "Jess is too easygoing to rod a syndicate outfit. He can see our side of things. Walsh wants us shoved off the rim so we can't winter graze our beef in the basin."

"Funny thing," Neally murmured, "how folks around here found out so much about me. Do I just naturally look tough?"

"You don't look any tougher than anybody else," she said honestly, "but looks don't mean anything. Mort Tarrant knows all about you. Now, if you've done gabbing—"

"I guess I have," Neally said mildly.

She nodded toward the door. "Then get."

Neally rose and stepping to the door, tossed his cigarette stub into the yard. "What makes you think I'll pull out of the basin?"

"You're smart enough to see how the land lies," she said quickly. "A man who kills for pay has no real stake in the fight. You haven't got a friend in the valley. Jess and the Anchor T boys don't fight your way, and Dad and Mort and the rest of our bunch will kill you if you stay."

"There is the matter of pay, ma'am."

"What good is pay to a dead man?"

"You've got an arguing point there," he agreed. He walked out of the house and mounted. Then he said with brutal frankness, "It won't work, ma'am. Tell Okeson I'll curry him down personally when I see him. He's mighty little to try hiding behind a woman."

She stood in the doorway, shotgun still in her hands. His words shocked her into silence for a moment. Then, as he wheeled his horse, he heard her cry, "Jess doesn't

know I'm here. Don't lay a hand—" but he didn't wait to hear the rest.

There were questions in Dan Neally's mind as he rode back to town, questions that must have answers, and Ann Ryan was the only person who would give them to him. Somebody was playing a tight, greedy game here in the basin, and Walsh had dropped him into the middle of it, expecting him to find his way like a blind man feeling for each step.

Walsh had claimed that Anchor T owned the basin, but Judy Sanger had said the little outfits had as much right to the grass as Anchor T. That made one of them a liar. Walsh had no reason to lie, and the Sanger girl had struck Neally as being on the level.

BY THE time Neally reached town, the sun was low in the western sky. Shadows were beginning to pile up in the cuts and recesses below the rim and wash out across the flat in purple waves. Neally was thinking of this pattern of human selfishness that was woven into the life of the basin. If he could find a single thread to pull, he could begin to unravel the tangle.

There appeared to be as little life in the town now as when he had left that afternoon. Neally stepped down in front of the mercantile and tried the door. It was locked. Swearing softly, he turned back to his horse. He stood there a moment, the uneasiness that had plagued him for days giving way to anger. He was tired of playing cat and mouse, of drifting like a blind man and feeling nothing but blank walls.

Neally returned his horse to the stable and took his warbag to the hotel. The liveryman had been coldly courteous. Now the clerk stared sourly at him, mouth curled in evident dislike.

"Town's pretty quiet," Neally said as he signed his name.

"Don't mean it won't blow up in your face afore morning," the clerk said, tossing a key on the desk. "Number twelve."

The hotel seemed as deserted as the rest of the town. Neally dropped his warbag on the bed and stepped into the hall. He stood listening for a moment, hearing no distant hum of voices, no creaking of floor boards.

The thing was crazy, fantastic. Maybe they thought he had the plague. He went down the stairs and crossed the lobby into

the dining room. It was empty. Only the tablecloths, the dull silverware, the bowls of crackers in the table centers gave a vague impression that life might be here.

Neally sat down with his back to the wall. A minute flowed by. Another. Then a third. He got up and moving across the room, pushed back the swinging door that led into the kitchen. A girl standing at the stove turned a pale face to him.

She said hesitantly, "Something for you?"

"Supper," he said sharply.

"What do you want?"

"Ham and potatoes. Coffee and pie if you've got it."

She sidled along the stove and into the pantry. "I'll start the ham."

He went back to his table. Presently the smell of frying ham came to him, and in a short time the girl came with his ham and fried potatoes and black coffee.

He asked sharply, "What's the matter with this town?"

"Nothing."

He ate hungrily while dusk descended. A lamp in the lobby made a yellow splash through the door on the dining room floor. From where he sat he could see no other light in town.

The girl came with his pie, a wide slab.

"Do I stink or do people think I've got smallpox?"

"Neither, Mr. Neally." She picked up his empty cup and almost ran to the kitchen.

When she returned with the filled cup, he asked, "How much is the meal?"

"Nothing."

She fled again, and he could only curse wearily as he pushed back his plate and reached for the pie. Everybody in Blackbow Basin seemed to know his name. They must know more about him than he knew himself. Even the meals were free to Dan Neally, but free meals were not compensation for being made a pariah.

III

WHEN he was finished eating, he scooted back his chair. There would be an instant as he went through the door into the lobby when the light would be on him. The fear these people had of him made him a fair target for any glory hound in the basin.

Neally circled the tables and went through the door in a rush. The clerk was behind the desk, across from him a stocky puncher who gave Neally a direct look, gray eyes filled with the same dislike Neally had been seeing all day.

Neally came to the desk. He said, "I'm done playing, mister. What in hell is the matter with this town?"

The clerk backed away, lips quivering. "Nothing. Wasn't your supper—"

"Come on. Talk. What's the matter with this town?"

"You," the puncher said. "You ain't bright, or you'd have figured that out."

"I'm bright enough," Neally growled, wheeling to face him. "Who are you?"

"Jess Okeson," the puncher said.

Neally said softly, "So you're Okeson. Did the Sanger girl tell you the message I gave her?"

"I haven't seen Judy today," Okeson said hotly. "What were you doing around her?"

"Why weren't you in town to meet me?" Neally countered.

"Why should I meet you?"

"Didn't Walsh write you I was coming?"

"Yeah." Okeson cuffed back his stetson. "Walsh says I'm supposed to stay on and run the outfit. You're to boss the fighting when we chase the little outfits off the rim, and Walsh says we're to back your play. He says you're hell on high red wheels with a six. By the time you're done, there won't be another outfit within a hundred miles of the basin." Okeson spat contemptuously at a brass spittoon. "I don't work that way, Neally. Try running Anchor T by yourself and see how you make out."

Okeson had the same idea the rest had. Dan Neally could talk until he was black in the face, and Okeson wouldn't believe him.

"Kind of funny," Neally said, "you throwing in with the little outfits."

"I ain't throwing in with nobody," Okeson shot back. "I don't like Mort Tarrant and the Vance boys a little bit, but Link Sanger and the rest of 'em are good men. They've never bothered Anchor T. No sense of Anchor T rawhiding them. There's enough grass for all of us. You try keeping 'em out of the basin, mister, and you'll be fighting a one-man war."

"You're sore because Walsh gave me your job," Neally murmured.

"You ain't got my job," Okeson snapped. "You're supposed to run the fighting end. Only there ain't gonna be no fighting if I can help it. That's what I came to town to tell you."

"Did it ever strike you that somebody's dealing off a stacked deck?"

"Nobody's had a chance to do any stacking but Walsh," Okeson answered, "and he's Far Western. Now, what's it gonna be, mister? You pulling out in the morning, or are you aiming to kick up a fight and try running Anchor T all by yourself?"

"Neither," Neally said.

"Then what in hell are you gonna do?"

Neally thought better with a cigarette in his mouth. He twisted one and sealed it before he answered. Jess Okeson was a capable man, the kind who could see the little fellows' side as well as Anchor T's. Judy Sanger had said that about him. It had been Neally's experience that a man like Okeson got along better in the long run than a hell-for-leather driver like Neally was supposed to be, but some of the boys back East who were looking for big profits didn't understand that.

"I asked you a question!" Okeson challenged.

OKESON was scared but he was trying to be tough. Neally touched a match flame to his cigarette before he said, "You ain't the proddy kind, Jess. I can handle you with either my fists or a gun. We both know that, so there's no use of you trying to play big. Let's get along."

"You can answer a question," Okeson said truculently.

"I can't answer it, because I don't know the answer. Where's your outfit?"

"In the timber."

"What about the little outfits?"

"The same."

"They've always used the basin for winter graze?"

"Sure."

"Walsh said Anchor T owned the basin."

"You're lying. He knows better. Far Western bought Anchor T from Rawhide Hale last winter. Walsh was here when the deal was made."

Neally hadn't known that Far Western had owned Anchor T less than a year, something else Walsh should have told

him. He drew a letter from his pocket and handed it to Okeson.

"We'd better settle one thing about who's ordering who, Jess. Don't get the idea I'm trying to push you out, but if the pinch comes, I expect you and every Anchor T rider you've got to back my play."

Okeson took the letter reluctantly. "We ain't backing you in no finish fight," he growled.

"Then you'd better read that sentence twice where Walsh says you're to stay on at your present wages, but I'm in the saddle."

Okeson read, scratching his wide chin, and raised his gray eyes to Neally. "That don't jibe with the letter he sent me."

"That Walsh's signature?"

"Looks like it."

"All right," Neally said testily. "I don't know why you're afraid of a scrap, but it don't look to me like we can duck it. Some of your friends met the stage today. Maybe you had your reasons for not meeting me in town. And putting the Sanger girl on Anchor T to give me her regards with a scattergun. You want to know what I'm aiming to do. I'll tell you. I'm going to find out who's cutting whose gullet and I expect your help."

"Not in no finish fight," Okeson said, temper bringing a hard shine to his eyes. "And keep Judy Sanger out of it."

"After the reception I got, I'm thinking that a finish fight is about what we'll have."

"I'll tell you why Okeson doesn't want a fight," a man said from the doorway. "You interested, Neally?"

Neally spun to face the man, gun lifted. He was a bulging man, hazel eyes deeply recessed in layers of fat. One leg was off at the hip. He stood on two specially reinforced crutches, smiling in a friendly way.

"Sure I'm interested," Neally said.

"You came in cold, my friend," the newcomer said. "Probably Walsh wouldn't know, so he couldn't tell you."

"You're talking too much, Ryan," Okeson grated. "Promoting a fight won't get you nothing."

"I can take your insults, Jess," Ryan said imperturbably, "the way I took Rawhide Hale's insults when he was in the basin. I think things will be different now. Mr. Neally strikes me as a man who will

change the situation."

"You were going to tell me something," Neally prompted.

"Oh, yes. The answer is simple enough. Jess is in love with Judy Sanger. That puts him in the pleasant position of being able to use Anchor T to keep the girl's affection. I wouldn't say Jess was a crook, Mr. Neally. He's just simple enough for a girl like Judy to twist him around her finger. That's why he's selling Anchor T to the rim bunch—"

Okeson lunged at Ryan, fist swinging to a fat jaw before Neally could move. Ryan lurched out of the doorway, crutches falling away from him, and sprawled on the boardwalk.

NEALLY leaped forward and gripped Okeson's shoulder and jerked him around, right fist cracking the Anchor T man on the jaw. Okeson's head snapped back, and he stumbled against the wall and spilled to the floor, knocked cold by the one punch. Neally wheeled to face the clerk, but there was no fight in him. He made no move.

Neally turned to Okeson and plucked the man's gun. He stepped through the doorway to Ryan who had pulled himself up and was inching along the wall to the door.

"Jess has an evil temper, Mr. Neally," the one-legged man said. "You'd better kill him when you can or he'll shoot you in the back. Just give me a hand up, will you, and let me have my crutches."

By the time Ryan was upright, Okeson was on his feet, one hand gingerly feeling of his jaw.

"They call me a tough hand, Jess," Neally said in slashing contempt, "but I never knocked a one-legged man off his feet."

Okeson shook his head, still feeling of his jaw. "Lost my temper," he mumbled. "Shouldn't have done it. Ryan's a scheming polecat, Neally. Go ahead and believe his lies." He crowded through the door and a moment later was pouring hoof-thunder down the dark street.

"Sorry to have made this disturbance, Mr. Neally," Ryan said apologetically, "but I've watched the way they've treated you from the moment you stepped down from the stage. If it hadn't been for my daughter, Ann, you would have

been in for a bad beating today."

"I know," Neally said. "I'm beholden to her, and to you."

"Not at all. Not at all. Ann's a fine girl. She's lonely. I would appreciate it if you had time to visit her. We're outcasts, you might say. Loved by none. Perhaps feared a little. You're in the same position." He shook his head sadly. "You will find the same cruelty and lack of understanding here in the wilderness that you will find in a city of a million people. On a smaller scale, of course, but it's the same vicious cruelty that mars man's relationship with man."

Puzzled, Neally said, "I guess that's the way it goes."

"Not necessarily, my friend, not necessarily." Ryan nodded at the hotel clerk. "Light the lamp in the parlor, will you, Richard. I want to talk to Mr. Neally privately."

The clerk scurried across the lobby. He jerked a door open, moving with nervous haste, scratched a match on the seat of his pants, and lighted the bracket lamp. Neally and Ryan came in, and he went out, closing the door on them.

"I would have gone to your room, Mr. Neally, but I find stair climbing difficult." Ryan held out his hand. "First, I want to introduce myself. I'm Enoch Ryan, owner of the mercantile and something of a local banker. It's a long way to Winnemucca on the south and Canyon City on the north, so I take care of the small cowmen if they need a little loan."

Neally gripped the plump, moist hand and stood until Ryan had eased himself into a chair. He took a seat on the leather couch and waited. It was impossible to read the man, and he found it hard to think of him as Ann Ryan's father, for he could see no likeness between them. More than that, he had a disturbing impression that Enoch Ryan lacked the frank honesty he had felt in the girl.

"I have lived in the basin a long time, Neally," Ryan said affably. "I know the passion and violence it provokes. It goes back to Rawhide Hale who came in years ago from California with a large herd and took the basin. He pushed the smaller ranchers like Link Sanger back to the rim and he built the ranch your people bought. Hale made a million dollars and died three months after the sale, which is

an interesting sidelight on the relationship of material wealth and eternity."

RYAN lifted a cigar from his pocket, offered it to Neally and when Neally shook his head, slid it into his own mouth.

"I'll tell you something that apparently Walsh failed to tell you. Or it's possible he didn't know it when Far Western bought Anchor T. Hale couldn't get a patent to all of Blackbow, so he had his buckaroos homestead a fringe around the basin and bought their places when they proved up.

"Anchor T has title to that ring of land around Blackbow, but the interior is public domain, open to entry and free range if the little outfits can get their cattle on it. Hale let them winter their stuff in the

have an ax to grind. That is one reason I have taken the trouble to tell you something no one else has. There is another reason, too—the sympathy I feel for the underdog. Every hand is against you, as you have found. Still, you haven't quit. I admire that in a man. You'll be the top man in the basin or you'll die trying. I like that."

"The ax you had to grind," Neally suggested.

"I'm coming to it. You see, Rawhide Hale never liked me, so I never got Anchor T business. He always sent his wagons north to the Columbia for his goods. I would like your account, Mr. Neally."

"I'll have a look at the records," Neally said cautiously as he rose.

What a Plight!



A young gamblin' rancher from Boulders,
Lost his roll and said to beholders—

"Back home on my spread,
I can find every head—

"But where is the one on my shoulders?"

by Pecos Pete

basin. In exchange, they furnished him with all the hay he needed and gave him help at roundup time, which saved him extra hands."

This was the thread Dan Neally had been looking for. He said thoughtfully, "So the rim bunch thinks Far Western sent me here to keep their stock from wintering in the bottom." •

"That's it. Okeson is afraid of the same thing. Since he's in love with Judy Sanger, he's trying to protect her people. I heard some of the talk and I had the impression that you did not agree on what authority Walsh had given you. I hope you will stand on your rights, Mr. Neally. I wouldn't believe anything Okeson said about his letter from Walsh."

"I'll have a look at it," Neally said briefly.

"Now, there's one more thing." Ryan took the cigar from his mouth and studied it with elaborate casualness. "I admit I

"I understand. I wish you the best of luck, sir. Just don't trust Okeson. And if you have time, drop in to see Ann."

"I will."

Neally turned to the door and swung back when Ryan said softly, "Oh, one more piece of advice. If I were you, I'd drop in and see Mort Tarrant before I took any decisive action."

IV

A LOCUST tree grew outside the window of Neally's hotel room, a graceful, silver-hued shape in the moonlight. A killer perched on one of its high limbs would have no trouble driving a bullet through the window into a man sleeping on the bed.

With the foresight that years of living by the gun had taught him, Neally fashioned a crude dummy on the bed, covered it with a blanket, and shoving a chair

under the doorknob lay down on the floor, his gun within reach.

Enoch Ryan had given him the thread that explained the hates and fears he had felt all day, but still only one thing came clear. Tarrant and Link Sanger and the rim bunch had known when he was coming. Since Okeson was the only man in the basin who knew the date of Neally's arrival, his perfidy and the motive for it seemed obvious.

Weariness overcame the ferment of Neally's thought, and he went to sleep with the answers to a dozen questions still evading him. It was the deep and undreaming sleep of a bone-tired man, so he did not hear the snapping of limbs in the locust, the scraping of knees and boots on the trunk. The gun roars brought him upright and instantly awake, right hand gripping his Colt butt.

Neally pronged back the hammer of his .45, lined his Colt on the shadowy figure of the gunman in the tree, and squeezed trigger. There was one more shot from the man in the locust, a wild shot that missed the window. He hung there a moment, the long cry of agony that broke out of him lasting after the echoes of gun fire had died. Then his grip loosened, and he crashed to the ground.

Kicking the chair away, Neally jerked the door open and thundered along the dark hall and down the stairs. The hotel clerk, clad in long-handled underwear, stumbled into the lobby, still sleep-befuddled, a chimney-smoked lamp in his hand.

"I knowed it was you, Neally," the clerk grunted as he set the lamp on the desk. "Can't you do your shooting in the daytime?"

"Not when somebody tries to make a clay pigeon out of me," Neally said grimly. "Get outside and take a look at the carcass that's under the tree."

The clerk stared blankly at Neally for a moment, then spun toward the door and lunged through it, Neally a step behind him. They swung around the hotel to the tree, the clerk snapping a match to fire as he knelt beside the dead man.

"Fred Gill." The clerk got to his feet, his hate a swift-flowing passion that jarred Dan Neally with the force of its impact. "A good boy who rode for Link Sanger. Your first killing, you damned devil, and I hope to hell it'll be your last."

Only the depth of the man's feelings could give him the courage to talk like that. Neally said nothing for a moment, waiting until the running steps of men along the street brought a crowd to them.

He said then, "This kid came in after I went to bed and asked what room I was in, didn't he?"

The clerk couldn't find his voice for a minute as his new-found courage seeped out of him. Some of the newcomers held lanterns, and in their smoky light, Neally recognized the stableman and one-legged Enoch Ryan. The rest were strangers, but the same hatred and fear that marked the hotel clerk was in all of them but Ryan.

IT WAS Ryan who said, "Better answer Neally's question, Richard. The way I judge him, he isn't one to wait for an answer."

"Yeah, Fred came in," the clerk said hoarsely, "but I didn't know what he aimed to do."

"He aimed to kill me," Neally said bluntly. "If I hadn't been through these things before, that's sure what he'd have done. You go upstairs and have a look at my bed. You'll find four slugs in a dummy I fixed to fool just such a coyote as this Fred Gill. And you call him a good boy."

"He has been, Neally," Ryan said with keen regret. "I can't understand why he'd do this."

"Because somebody paid him," Neally snapped. "Maybe it was Link Sanger. Maybe not, but I'll find out, and you can tell him I'll square this up before I'm done."

Neally swung away, leaving them staring after him in cold, repressed silence. He went back up the stairs and taking a room farther down the hall, went to sleep, this time in the bed.

Long habit woke Neally early. He dressed, ordered breakfast from the harassed girl who had given him supper, and took the same bay gelding he had ridden the day before. He racked his horse in front of the mercantile and this time found the store open.

Ann Ryan came out of the deep gloom of the building's interior, tall and round-bodied and graceful as he remembered her.

She said, "Good morning, Mr. Neally," and moved along the counter until she stood with only the pine plank between them.

"Morning," Neally said, surprised by the way the girl stirred him. There had been little time in his life for women. He was surprised, too, when he realized how many times he had thought about her since he had come to Blackbow Basin.

"Your dad here, or do you run the store?"

"He does most of the time." She turned her gray eyes to the door at the back, hesitated as if uncertain what she should do, then she gave him a direct look. "He's sleeping this morning. He was up most of the night after you shot Fred Gill."

There was no condemnation in her voice.

He said, "I want some bacon, flour, and a couple cans of tomatoes."

She hesitated, her eyes questioning, and then nodding, turned away. A moment later, when his bundle was wrapped and he had laid the money on the counter, she said, "It's not that I'm just nosy, Mr. Neally, but I invested more in you yesterday than you've guessed. I hope you're not leaving the basin."

"Why do you hope that?" he asked, smiling at her.

She reddened and dropped her gaze. "Nothing personal. I stepped in yesterday because I wanted something from you. I still want it."

"What?"

Again her eyes turned to the door at the back, and he felt the conflict within her. She said softly, "A man could not be as tough nor as evil as you have been painted, but I hope you are tough enough to stop something before it starts. Rawhide Hale made enough misery to last this basin through eternity."

THE door squeaked open, and Enoch Ryan came in on his crutches.

"Good-by, Mr. Neally," Ann said with studied indifference. "I hope you'll have a nice ride to Canyon City. You can catch a stage there without much trouble."

"You're leaving?" Ryan asked sharply. "I didn't peg you for a man who'd run, Neally."

"We all make mistakes when we try to figure how the other fellow's going to

jump." There was something here Neally couldn't put his finger on, something in Ann's relationship with her father, and he wondered if it had anything to do with the bigger problem that faced the basin. He lifted his hat in a quick, gallant gesture that was not in keeping with the tough exterior he showed the world.

"I'm still remembering I owe you a favor, Miss Ryan, for what you did yesterday."

"Now, just a minute, Neally," Ryan said with unexpected heat. "You can't ride off like this. Not after what happened when you got off the stage and with Okeson talking the way he did yesterday."

Neally had no intention of leaving the basin but he couldn't see that it should make any difference to Ryan either way. Ann had given him his cue, so he played the game out.

"A man can't buck his own people and the other bunch, too. It's Far Western's trouble, not mine."

"Where's your pride, man?" Ryan belated. "Did you see Mort Tarrant, as I advised you?"

"It was poor advice, Ryan." Neally picked up his package. "I saw enough of Tarrant yesterday."

"Well, I'll be damned." Ryan swung forward on his crutches, nudging Ann away so that he stood with only the narrow counter between him and Neally. "I thought you were a tough, ornery son who would burn enough powder to do your job, and here you are, sloping out of the basin like a scared pup. You yellow or did they buy you off?"

"Neither," Neally said coldly. "I'm just smart enough to see how the cards run."

Neally wheeled away and had reached the door before Ryan called, "The Anchor T account means a good deal to me. I'll give you a thousand dollars bonus if you play your hand out."

"Not interested," Neally grunted and left the store, wondering why Ryan would offer a bonus for more than the account could make him in a year.

V

RIDING northward, Neally reached the first scattered pines of the foothills before noon. He followed the road for

two hours until the timber closed around him, then turned into the trees and paralleled the road for another hour. He was traveling upslope now, the road climbing by switchbacks. Neally covered the same distance back with half the mileage by putting his horse directly up the mountain.

By midafternoon, he was close to the top. He found a small spring and there he made camp. He built a fire, boiled coffee, and fried bacon, and when he had eaten, he lay back and built a smoke.

There was not, as far as he could see, any real reason for trouble, and Clint Walsh had said the same, but trouble was here nonetheless. Young Gill's try for his life was proof enough.

He thought back over the talk in Ryan's store and could make nothing of it. He couldn't guess what lay between Ann and her father, or the part Ryan had in the basin's trouble. Then, sensing the uselessness of trying to pierce this wall with his thoughts, he let his mind linger on Ann.

Before dusk, he gathered a high pile of deadwood pine limbs, cooked bacon, and opened a can of tomatoes. Mountain twilight was upon him; then, and he threw more wood on the fire. It blazed up, the flames a beacon that could be seen a great distance through the scattered timber. He moved back to the fire, eased his gun in its casing, and hunkered there to wait, a half-smoked cigarette dangling from his lips.

No one would be satisfied that he had left the valley. They would hunt for him—the rim bunch or Anchor T or both. He didn't know when they would come, but unless he had mistaken the basin's temper, it would be before the night was gone.

Here, in the forest stillness, there was time to think of the purpose that had brought him to Oregon and how it had been defeated by his reception in Red Bend before he had had a chance to show them what he was. With the passage of minutes, the hurt in him deepened, but there was no breaking of a decision that had been made when he'd left Colorado. Either folks here would know him and accept him as one of them or he would never take another job with a cattle syndicate.

There were still a few traces of sun-

light on the western horizon when he heard the needle-muffled sound of a horse's hoofs. Rising, he moved farther back from the fire, gun palmed. The horse was coming slowly and was circling the fire. It passed within ten feet of him, and he saw the rider. It was Ann Ryan.

Still Neally didn't move. If he couldn't trust this girl, he could trust no one in the basin, but he knew of more than one man who had died because he trusted a woman. So he waited until she had completed a cautious circle. It was not until she found his bay and recognized it that she came into the flame light and dismounted.

Ann knelt beside the fire and picking up a pine limb, nudged a live coal into the open before she turned it over. She said, "All right, Neally. I'm alone."

He came into the circle of light, not yet certain whether he was making a target of himself.

"You're a good tracker," he said, "or lucky."

"I knew you wouldn't leave the basin," she said, still not looking up. "A person wouldn't have to be a good tracker to find you with a fire like that."

"I wanted them to find me."

"Then you want them to kill you."

"No. I guess I like life as well as anybody, but I saw you buffalo the rim bunch and I met Jess Okeson. Now that I've figured their caliber, I'll know how to handle 'em."

"You're a confident man."

"I know what I can do."

SHE rose and gave him a direct look. "Killers draw high wages if they're good at their trade, but you don't strike me as a man who would forget everything but the money he's making."

"I'm not. I'd have gone after Mort Tarrant before now if I was. There's more to this than Tarrant, and I aim to find out what it is."

"Lots more," the girl breathed, "but you'll die before you find out. There's too much, too many who want your death for their own reasons. You'll stay and you'll fight and you'll die. Is Clint Walsh's money enough to make it worth while?"

"I never turn back," he said roughly.

"Why did you follow me?"

She moved toward him. "You're caught

like all the rest of us, Dan. Yesterday it was just a job. Today it's something more that's holding you." She paused and added thoughtfully, "Pride, perhaps."

He watched the firelight paint its color on her face; he saw that her gray eyes were fixed on him as if she sensed something here that was beyond words, something fine and sweet and eternal as the sunrise.

He asked again, "Why did you follow me?"

"I didn't know whether my father had fooled you with his fine talk or not," she said simply. "He's a scheming man with small love for me and great love for power. He hopes to use you."

"How?"

"He wants the rim outfits busted up and Anchor T made so expensive to operate that Far Western will be glad to sell it at a loss. A range war would do that. It isn't just the Anchor T account he wants. It's the spread itself and the rim ranches to boot. Then it will be all his, and he can laugh on Rawhide-Hale's grave."

Still it didn't come clear. Perhaps Enoch Ryan wanted to make his own selfish use of him, but Ryan could have had nothing to do with the reception he'd received in Red Bend, for only Okeson had known the time of Neally's arrival. And there was too much real hatred between Okeson and the storekeeper to think that they could cooperate.

"If Okeson is like the rest of the Anchor T hands, I won't be busting anybody," Neally said.

"You have your gun." She pointed to it significantly. "From what we've heard, you could do the job yourself."

"You're talking in circles," he said roughly. "I still don't know why you came up here."

"I want peace," she said slowly. "I've lived here through the years when Rawhide Hale was building Anchor T and pushing the little fellows out of the basin. I've seen my father change from an honest storekeeper to a scheming madman. I guess I'm like a little girl who believes in fairy stories. I couldn't keep from hoping you'd change things."

"Change what?"

"Turn back the clock. I wanted to see my father the way he was before he lost his leg. I wanted to see Link Sanger and

the rest the way they were before Hale beat them down to half-men like they are now."

"Nobody can turn the clock back."

"I know. I said I was like a little girl believing in fairy stories. It will have to go on until men are killed and for no good reason, except that Enoch Ryan and Clint Walsh schemed them into it, but you don't have to stay and die like the rest."

"You said Walsh?"

ANN nodded. "He thinks Dad is working with him. I'll tell you why I followed you. I'm trying to do a little good to make up for the evil my father is doing." She gripped his arm. "Get out of the basin, Dan. There's nothing for you here."

"I think there is."

"What?"

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "I came out here where folks didn't know me. I thought they had never heard of me, but they have. Maybe I was a tough hand in Colorado where I had a reputation to live up to, but Blackbow Basin is going to change its notions about me."

Her grip tightened on his arm. "Tarrant and his bunch are looking for you now. Do you have to stay and fight?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He held his answer for a moment, conscious of the pressure of her fingers on his arm, of her face that had become soft with a strong, unspoken feeling. He had just told her why he had to stay. She hadn't believed him or she hadn't understood. Or perhaps there was another reason, and she wanted him to say it, but he couldn't until the trouble was settled.

He said at last, "It's not just for the fight. I've found what I've been looking for."

"But there'll be more killings—"

"Sometimes a doctor has to take off a leg to save a life."

"But the innocent will die, too."

"I've seen it go that way sometimes."

She dropped her hand and turned to her horse. "If somebody must die, Walsh had better be the first. Or my father."

"Walsh is a long ways from here. That leaves your dad."

"Walsh isn't very far. By this time he's

probably at Anchor T."

He pulled her back to face him. "You sure?"

"No, but he was in the store today. Where else would he go?"

Clint Walsh had told Neally he wouldn't be in the basin until fall. He had too much to do at Far Western's Nevada and California ranches, he'd said, to get to Blackbow Basin for several months. Now Neally cursed himself for a fool. He'd hated to believe the things he'd seen unfolding before him.

"Where will I find Okeson and Anchor T's camp?"

"The camp's about an hour's ride west of here, but Jess will likely be at the ranch." She stepped into the saddle. "Good luck," she said in a voice carefully held to a casual tone, and rode away through the timber.

VI

NEALLY saddled the bay, kicked out his fire, and took a westward course through the timber. He rode slowly, letting the horse have his head and thinking about what Ann had told him.

Neally couldn't guess what Ryan had in mind but he had an idea of what Walsh was playing for. Probably he had spent years building his reputation for this very opportunity. He had planned to use Neally to force the fight with the rim ranchers, but the Boston stockholders would want no part of a bloody and expensive battle, and he had worked it so that he would get no blame for the fight he would bring about. Neally would. Then the stockholders would sell Anchor T for a fraction of what they'd paid, and Walsh would be the buyer with Ryan as a silent partner.

Neally wondered if he could make Okeson see through Walsh's scheming? He had his doubts, and the hour of riding that it took to reach Anchor T's camp brought no certainty to him.

When he was within fifty yards of the fire, Neally called, "Hello, Anchor T."

He saw men stir and draw back into the shadows, saw Okeson's stocky figure remain by the flames and heard his summons, "Ride in." When Neally came into the firelight, Okeson tipped his head to stare upward, face dark with hostility. He

said gruffly, "Get down."

Neally's gaze ranged over the Anchor T riders who had drawn back toward the chuckwagon. There were five of them, dark figures in the fringe of light, standing motionless as if waiting for him to make a wrong move.

"Beans in the pot," Okeson said coldly. "Coffee yonder."

"Had 'supper." Neally swung down. "Jess, I'm taking over."

"Figured you'd try," Okeson grunted, "but you won't make it stick. Nobody can be as tough as Walsh claimed you was or as Tarrant and that bunch think you are."

"That's right," Neally said surprisingly. "I'm not that good. Everybody in the basin, including you, pegged me wrong."

"I pegged you right," Okeson growled. "I'm gonna lick you. You ain't taking my job, bragging about how you can lick me with fists or a gun like you done last night, and then swinging on me when I ain't looking."

"Don't be a fool, Jess. We're working for Far Western, not Clint Walsh. He's playing his own crooked game. That's why his letters didn't jibe."

"You're a damned liar," Okeson snarled.

Neally knew how it was. Okeson wouldn't listen until he was beaten. He had had twenty-four hours to brood over what had happened in the hotel. Now, before his crew, he had to make his try.

"All right," Neally murmured. "After I've beaten hell out of you, you're riding to Anchor T with me. We'll get the truth out of Walsh."

For a moment Okeson's determination wavered. "Another one of your lies. Walsh is in Reno."

Neally led his horse out of the firelight. "No. Ann Ryan told me he was in the store today." He laid his gunbelt at the foot of a pine and turned to Okeson. "There's no sense to this, Jess."

"When I get done with you," Okeson grated, "you'll know there was no sense in your coming to the basin."

Okeson was coming forward on his toes, thick shoulders hunched, his face a mirror of his temper. He was cocked for trouble and still the driving will to fight was not in him. Judy had said, "He's too easy-going to rod a syndicate outfit," and his indecisiveness now showed it.

He came within a pace of Neally and stopped, fists balled in front of him. Neally whipped a punch between his hands to his stomach, and Okeson went back, the breath bursting out of him in a gusty sigh.

JESS OKESON was no fighter, but there was a dogged kind of courage in him that brought him lunging at Neally now, and Neally felt admiration for him. Okeson knew he couldn't win but he was bound to try.

Neally parried a fist, rolled his head with another, and then Okeson, in a wild rage at his own futility, brought his right back and down for a tremendous swing. Neally, stepping in fast, fainted with his left and then sent a sledging right to the point of Okeson's exposed chin.

That was all. Okeson's knees folded, and he dropped face down in the trodden dirt of the camp. Neally stepped back to his gunbelt and picked it up. He had a bad moment then, his back to the men at the chuckwagon. He straightened, buckling the belt around him, and saw that there would be no trouble. The men moved into the firelight. One of them had picked up a bucket of water and sloshed it on Okeson's face.

Neally held his silence until Okeson sat up, breathing hard and pawing the water out of his eyes. Neally said then, "From now on, I'm rodding the outfit. Any objections?"

There were none. Okeson got up, finger tips exploring his chin. He said, "What's this gonna buy you?"

"Won't buy me nothing. I told you we're working for Far Western."

He'd have a grumbling obedience now, but he needed more than that. They were good men, he judged. As good as Jess Okeson, whom he liked. Cowboys, whether in Colorado or Oregon, gave an unswerving loyalty to their outfit, but it would not be to Dan Neally. Later, perhaps, but not now.

"Saddle up, Jess," Neally said. "We'll find Walsh if he's in the basin. When he's done talking, we'll know some things we don't know now. Rest of you stay here till I send for you."

Okeson turned toward his horse, saddled him, and a moment later was riding toward Anchor T, Neally beside him.

"I've been up against some tough deals," Neally said, "but nothing like this before. The deck was stacked when I hit Red Bend. Been stacked right down the line. I think you know something about it, Jess."

Okeson said nothing. Neally waited, feeling the edge of the man's sour temper and realizing there was some reason for it, but time was running out. If he read this situation right, it would soon build to the boiling point, and there was still much he didn't know.

"I signed a contract with Far Western," Neally said quietly. "Walsh told me to hold what Anchor T had and show a profit. I'm going to do that, Jess, if I have to run the rim bunch out, but I don't think it'll take that. Trouble is they figured that's what I'd aim to do, so they started pushing. Now, I want to know who made 'em figure that way."

"Dunno," Okeson growled.

"Syndicate spreads can get along with their little neighbors," Neally went on, "but to do that the ramrod has to look at the way it works in the long run. If the syndicate wants to squeeze out a fat return quick and overstock its range, you've got trouble. I know a little about Far Western's big stockholders. Pretty smart gents, Jess. They'll want us to get along with our neighbors because a fight is expensive. Cuts down profits like hell. If I can get hold of Link Sanger and talk to him, maybe I can make him see it. How'll I do it?"

"You can't," Okeson muttered. "When they see you coming, they'll start shooting."

"Then it's up to you to bring Sanger to Anchor T. He trusts you."

"Not me," Okeson growled. "I'd get plugged the minute I showed up on the rim."

"How'd you get the job rodding Anchor T?"

"You think I ain't big enough to handle it?" Okeson demanded.

"I didn't say that," Neally answered quietly. "You don't like your job. That's all. You've got to like a job of this kind to do it right. It takes some fighting and maybe some dying. Your loving Judy Sanger don't give you no right to sit on the fence. Which side you gonna be on at the finish?"

OKESON held his answer for a long moment. Neally, staring at the squat dark figure in the saddle, had no clue to the man's thoughts until he said, "I'll side you as long as you stay on the right track."

"Thanks. Now, how did the rim bunch know when I was getting into Red Bend?"

"Tarrant was the one that knew. He's been gabbing about how tough you was."

"Who is he?"

"Dunno. Came in last winter and bought a little ten-cow outfit next to Sanger's S Star."

Neally let it drop then. Maybe Okeson didn't know, but Walsh would, and if Walsh was at Anchor T, he'd talk. They came out of the timber presently, and angled across the flat toward the dot of light that marked the ranch house.

"Who's there?"

"The cook and old Rush Hadley. Rush is too stove up to work much. Kind of picks up around the place."

"Pretty late for them to be up, ain't it?"

"I was thinking the same," Okeson said. "I don't like that light."

As they came close to the house, they slowed their pace and made a half circle to the front. There was no sign of life. Neally reined up and motioned for Okeson to stop. They sat a long moment in silence, hearing nothing.

"Jumpy, ain't you?" Okeson asked scornfully.

"You live longer," Neally said. "We'll walk in."

"Hell, I don't walk—"

"We'll walk in," Neally said, and dismounting, cut swiftly toward the house.

Grumbling, Okeson followed. They came around the corrals, swift-striding, hawking shadows across a moon-touched earth. The light was in the office, Neally saw as he swung on into the house.

VII

THE office door was open, the light from a lamp on the desk spilling into the front room. Clint Walsh sat there, skinny and long-necked. Neally was within a step of him before Walsh knew anyone else was in the room.

He said, "Hello, Jess. Thought you'd be in."

Neally stopped, saying nothing, and

Walsh looked up. Meaty blue lips dropped apart, red-flecked green eyes swung wildly before Walsh spun the swivel chair away from the desk and stood up.

"Surprised, Walsh?"

The Far Western man moved to the window, fishing in his coat pocket for a match. "Why, yes. I didn't know you'd got here."

Okeson stood in the doorway, watching closely. Neally said, "Walsh, you're lying. What did you hire me for?"

"To do a job of fighting if it had to be done." Walsh lit a cigar. "You're getting fighting wages, Neally."

"I'm a little more than a gunslick with an iron for hire, Walsh. You looked into my record in Colorado. You know that."

Walsh shrugged his round, bony shoulders as if it weren't important. "I don't know about that, Neally. When we bought this place from Rawhide Hale, we bought a lot of trouble Hale had stirred up with his range-hog tactics. I went after the best fighting man I could find."

"You got him," Neally grated, "and you're going to be damned sorry you did. Now, get this, Walsh. When you hired me, you hired me to work for Far Western. That's what I'm doing. I've run into some mighty funny things since I got here. There's only one way I can account for them."

Walsh's sandy brows lifted. "How?"

"You're selling Far Western out," Neally said bluntly. "From now on, I'm giving orders, Walsh."

"The hell you are!"

Neally crossed the room, jerked the cold cigar from the blue lips, and threw it down. He grabbed a handful of Walsh's shirt, whipped him around, and slapped him into the chair hard.

"You've got some questions to answer. Why did you say Anchor T owned the basin when all we've got is a ring of land around the outside?"

"I didn't know that." Walsh licked his lips and shot a glance at the scowling Okeson. He saw he'd made the wrong answer and tried to correct it with, "I mean that Hale claimed the basin. It's ours if we want to hold the rim cattle out."

"No, it isn't ours because the rim bunch has used it. As long as it's open range, they still have a right to use it. Maybe

you can do better on this one. Why did you tell me I was to take over and run the outfit when you wrote Okeson he was to keep running it and I was to do the fighting?"

"You're fired, Neally," Walsh squalled. "You've got no right—"

"I'm making my right, Walsh," Neally grated. "You hired me for a year, so I'm hanging on for that year." He struck Walsh on the side of the face with an open palm. "Answer my question."

Walsh shoved his shoulder against the back of the chair. "Okeson knew conditions here. No sense taking him off for a stranger. I wanted you to do the fighting."

"You didn't tell me there'd be any fighting."

"A man can't think of everything."

Neally's smile was small and cold. "There was a hell of a lot you forgot, Walsh, but you didn't forget to let Tarrant know when I'd get to town, did you?"

WALSH was scared then. Neally saw it grow in him, draw his lips together, narrow his eyes to long green slits, saw the pulse beat in his temples. Neally had judged there was little sound courage in the man and he was sure now when Walsh jerked a clawlike hand at Okeson.

"Pull him off me, Jess," Walsh cried in a voice shrill with hysteria. "Get him out of here."

"Stay out of it, Jess." Neally kept his eyes on Walsh. "Answer me. You let Tarrant know—"

But Neally wasn't prepared for Walsh's move. He came out of his chair in a swift, panicky rush and bolted for the window. Neally grabbed for him and missed. Walsh dived head first through the window.

Neally swore and drawing his gun, lunged to the window. He saw Walsh get up and then go down immediately, the way a dead man falls, as a gun flashed from the poplars. Again the red ribbon slashed into the darkness, lead splattering more glass splinters to the floor.

Swinging around, Neally batted out the lamp and slid around the desk.

"All right, Jess," he said softly. "They're outside. Now, we'll see which side you're really on."

Neally guessed it was Tarrant and the rim bunch. He expected them to rush the

house but he had Okeson to his back. He thought he could trust the foreman but he wasn't sure. So he stood in the office doorway, gun palmed, waiting for the attack and keeping his eyes on the dark bulk of Okeson's figure.

Not until this moment had Dan Neally realized how entirely alone he was. Walsh's panicky flight had been the act of a hysterical, guilty man. Okeson was still torn between his sense of loyalty and his love for Judy Sanger. There was, too, his bitterness at Neally for taking his job. He had been, Neally guessed, a thirty-a-month rider who had suddenly been elevated to ramrod, so his bitterness was understandable.

Ann Ryan? She had wanted him to leave the basin. She had given him one look into her heart. He knew now that she feared her father, hated the thing he was scheming to do. Still, he was her father, so her tongue had been partially tied. Neally could hope it was her feeling for him that had forced her to make a night ride to ask him to leave the basin, but it was only a hope. More likely it was fear for her father's life.

For a long moment, Neally stood there beside Okeson, waiting, hammer back, nerves taut, while his thoughts ran swiftly as they do in that moment when a man waits for death. Then they lingered on Ann, and he knew that most would have called him a fool for not riding on, for not asking Ann to go with him.

There was nothing to hold him here but his word, a scrawled signature on a contract binding him to fight and perhaps die for a syndicate whose home office was three thousand miles away. Ann Ryan had said that it had no soul, and she was right. The amount of justice and human decency used in its relationship with Link Sanger and his neighbors depended upon who rodded Anchor T.

A light bloomed in the bunkhouse, and an old voice called out, "What in hell is the shooting about?"

"Rush Hadley," Okeson breathed. "Can't see good enough to hit a bull if he was ten feet away."

Then the sound of a horse's hoofs came clearly to Neally. There would be no fight tonight. He ran out of the house, cursing bitterly, Okeson a step behind. If he had known there was only one man, he

wouldn't have remained inside.

"Tarrant," Okeson said.

Not until then did Neally know that Okeson had drawn his gun. He said, "Maybe," his eyes swinging west toward Red Bend, but the night had swallowed the rider.

Okeson had cased his gun, and kneeling beside Walsh, struck a match and looked at the man's face. "Dead," he said and rose. "Drilled a little below the eyes. Rush, fetch a lantern."

OLD RUSH HADLEY hobbled from the bunkhouse, lantern swinging at his side, grumbling because he couldn't sleep without somebody shooting the place up. Then he saw Walsh, and was silent.

"Tote him inside," Neally ordered and took the lantern from Hadley.

Neally moved slowly to the poplars, tilting the lantern so that the light fell on the ground before him. He paused between steps, studying the dust. Suddenly he froze. There was the print of a single foot. On both sides were round holes, the kind crutches would make.

It was hard to believe that a one-legged man could ride a horse from Red Bend to Anchor T and back, but Neally remembered that it was some time after the shooting before he had heard the killer's horse. It would take several seconds for such a man to pull himself into the saddle, more seconds before he would put his mount into a run.

"Find anything?" Okeson asked from the porch.

"Found where he stood," Neally answered evasively. Picking up the lantern, he returned to the house. "Put the body in a wagon and take it into town, Hadley. Give him a hand, Jess, and take care of the horse. Then come inside."

It was half an hour before Okeson stepped into office, the creak of the wagon dying down the road to Red Bend. He said, "Old Rush didn't like the idea much. Afraid of Walsh's ghost, I reckon."

"We're bucking more'n ghosts, Jess." Neally swung his swivel chair and pinned his gaze on Okeson. "What do you make of Walsh's killing?"

"Tarrant," Okeson said with grim certainty.

Neally shrugged. He picked up the sheet of paper upon which he had been writing.

"Just finished a letter to the home office. They'll want to know about Walsh's death, and I thought I'd better tell them about the situation here."

Okeson scanned the letter and gave it back, his face reflecting surprise. "You say it's best to let the rim ranchers use the basin and that I'm well liked around here."

"It's true, ain't it?"

"I didn't think you'd say so."

"Sanger and his neighbors don't think I'd say so, either. Until they'll listen to me we've got a fight. Jess, sometimes getting a man to listen is the hardest job you can do."

"I know," Okeson murmured.

Neally slipped the letter into an envelope and sealed it. "Let's get a little sleep. Then head back to camp and get your boys. Have them in town before noon."

Suspicion made a dark passage across Okeson's face.

"You're bound to have your fight, ain't you?"

"No. I think we can get around it."

"Then you don't need us."

"Do you think there's a chance for peace as long as Tarrant's alive?"

Okeson scratched his wide chin. "Tarrant's just a gunslick. You could buy his spread for five hundred dollars."

"He wouldn't sell, Jess. Too much in the pot they're playing for. How many more like him?"

"Just the Vance boys. They came in last year 'bout the time Tarrant did."

"Jess, I've got an idea what this is all about but I can't prove it, so I've got to play the game out. Tarrant and the Vance boys make one problem, Sanger and the rest another. How much law is there around here?"

Okeson laughed shortly. "When Rawhide Hale ran things, he was the law. Now there ain't any. We're better'n a hundred some odd miles from the county seat."

"I figured that was the way it was." As Okeson turned toward the door, Neally asked casually, "Can Ryan ride a horse?"

"Yeah. He's got a special built saddle. Place to stick his crutches." Then Okeson saw what was in Neally's mind, and he shook his head. "He didn't kill Walsh. Tires him to ride this far."

VIII

WHEN Okeson had ridden out, Neally lay down on the horsehair couch but he slept little before dawn. He knew two things: he loved Ann Ryan and he had to kill her father. He understood the hell that Jess Okeson faced, for Okeson loved Judy Sanger, and his choice might be the same.

If he killed Enoch Ryan, he would stop the man's scheming and bring peace to the basin. Tarrant and the others would drift on. Jess Okeson could marry Judy and share the basin with Sanger and the rest. He would ride away then, alone, across the unmarked miles of solitude, to go on living the same life he had always lived.

Neally's hand fisted, nails digging into his palms. Sweat made a film across his forehead. It was hell either way he went.

He slept at last. When Neally woke, his face was drawn and haggard, and misery was a pressing ache in him. He shaved, had breakfast in the cookshack, and learned that Okeson had already ridden out.

Fatalism built a wall in Neally's mind. He could not look beyond it. He had no way of knowing what Ryan's reaction would be when accused of Walsh's murder. A footprint and two round holes in the dust were not proof enough to hang a man, and the full motive behind the killing was not yet evident to Dan Neally.

The sky, unmarred by cloud or smoke haze, was deep-colored. Northward, the Blue Mountains made a high swell above the Blackbow. Rimrock, walling the other three sides of the basin, harbored soft morning shadows or rose in rugged challenge where unshaded sunlight cut across it. A distant meadowlark's song stirred Neally with his poem of sound.

A good earth, a good basin where a man would be able to live in peace and beget children and clothe the dreams he had dreamed with reality. But that was not for Dan Neally. Long experience with trouble in its varied pattern of violence and death had given him a prophetic feel. Now he judged the finish was not far ahead. If he died, well, it was the lot of all men. If he lived—

He thought of Ann Ryan again and if he had been a praying man, he would have

prayed that Enoch Ryan would die. But he could not be the instrument of the man's going.

The sun was not yet noon high when he rode into Red Bend. The same weariness seemed upon the town, the isolation, the aloneness. A single horse was racked in front of the Hoof and Horn. A yellow, short-haired dog trotted down the middle of the street. There was no other sign of life.

A cold purpose ruled Dan Neally now. Mort Tarrant and Link Sanger might still be in the mountains hunting for him. Again, they might be here in town. This time, Tarrant would shoot him from a window or a doorway without giving him a chance to defend himself. He had to see Enoch Ryan before that happened.

Neally reined in to the livery stable. "Link Sanger in town?" he asked.

The hostler chewed on his lower lip a moment, holding his answer until he had thought about it. He said then, "No, not today."

"Mort Tarrant?"

"No."

Neally paced along the drive to the corrals in the back and returned. There was no evidence that the rim men were in town. He would have recognized Tarrant's big black. He paid the stableman and strode quickly across the street to the mercantile. He went in, blinking a moment until his eyes became accustomed to the gloom.

"Dan."

Ann Ryan hurried along the counter to him. He saw another woman in the back then and heard her cry out in disbelief. It was Judy Sanger.

"I want to see your dad," Neally said tonelessly.

Ann touched a purple bruise on her cheek. "He gave me that when I got back last night. He knew where I went and why. Don't see him now, Dan. He'll kill you."

JUDY came toward them, small fists clenched. "Why try to save this man's life, Ann? I should have killed him when I had the chance. Now there'll be more blood shed than in all the time Rawhide Hale was here."

"Hale must have been a heller," Neally murmured. "I keep hearing about him."

"He was," Judy said scornfully, "but he owned Anchor T. He wasn't a gunslick foreman for a syndicate that doesn't have a soul."

The same old thing, and he'd hear it again when Link Sanger got back. He said, "Somebody taught a good lesson with that speech." He turned to Ann. "Why did he hit you?"

"He was afraid you would leave the country before you had stirred up the fight he wants." She smiled painfully, for the bruise reached to the edge of her mouth. "I knew you wouldn't go. Judy, you're wrong about Dan. He's not just a gunslick foreman for a syndicate."

Neally didn't wait to hear what Judy Sanger said. He paced the length of the aisle that bisected the store, turned the knob and shoving the door open, stepped into the Ryan living room.

"Come in, Neally," Enoch Ryan said softly. "Come in and sit down."

Ryan was in a wheel chair. As Neally came into the room, he had the feeling that Ryan's chair had only then stopped moving. There would be, he thought, a peephole somewhere in the wall and Ryan had been watching.

Neally closed the door behind him. He took a quick look around the room. It was plainly furnished, a picture of Mt. Hood on the wall, two rocking chairs, a rag rug on the floor, a simple home-made pine table in the corner. Ryan sat with a quilt across his lap. He pulled it a little higher over his one leg and huddled forward as if he were cold, his eyes almost hidden in their deep wells.

"Where were you last night?" Neally asked bluntly.

"In bed," Ryan said cheerfully. "Even half a man like me has to sleep." He reached to a shelf behind him for a cigar. "I thought you'd be in Canyon City before now."

"I didn't intend to leave," Neally said bluntly. "Too much unfinished business here."

"You play a foxy game, friend," Ryan murmured. "What was the purpose of your lie?"

"I've been feeling around since I got here and grabbing onto nothing but air. I thought that if I pretended to leave and didn't, I'd have somebody on my tail, pushing to see that I sloped out like I said.

Maybe I wanted to get a chance to talk to Sanger. Okeson thinks he's a good man."

Ryan smiled tolerantly. "Any man in love is a fool, Neally, and Okeson loves Sanger's girl. A woman in love is a fool, too." He lifted a pudgy hand. "Love is a passion, and passion colors a man's thinking. There's only one way to get along in this hell we call a world—love nothing and think clearly. Then you can get what you set out after."

"You love something, Ryan."

Ryan's brows lifted. "I wasn't aware that I did."

"Yourself."

"No." The fat man shook his head in disagreement. "How can half a man love even himself? You would never understand, Neally. You're big. Tough. Strong. Lots of cold courage. Gun speed. A good man with your fists. You've got everything you want." Ryan smiled. "Why, Ann would say you were handsome."

Outside there was the sound of horses, and men called out. Sanger and his friends were back. Ryan cocked his head to listen and then pinned his gaze on Neally. "Why did you ask me where I was last night, friend?"

Here was the man who was back of all the trouble that plagued the valley, a madman, his own daughter had said. Perverted, Neally knew now, by the pain and mental suffering that the loss of his leg had brought upon him. Only Enoch Ryan could tell Sanger what had happened. That was the one way Sanger could be made to listen. Tarrant could be handled later.

IX

IN THAT moment, Neally made his decision. He said, "You can stop the fight that's been building since I hit town two days ago."

Ryan smiled and shook his great head. "I don't want to stop the fight. I want to see it. I keep wondering if any man can be as much of a man as they say you are."

"No good will come from a fight, Ryan," Neally said sharply. "Not for you. I know you killed Clint Walsh last night. If you want to save your neck a stretching,

you'll do what I tell you."

"I think not, Neally." Ryan motioned with his left hand toward a chair, right hand slipping under his lap quilt. "Think twice before you say anything or make a try for your iron." A gun barrel tilted upward under the quilt, making a pointed ridge. "I'm a good shot. If you looked at Walsh's body, you know that."

Neally had not expected this. Enoch Ryan was a schemer, a hirer of guns, a man who would murder from the protection of darkness, but Neally had not thought he possessed the kind of courage it took to hold a gun on another man. Now, meeting the fat man's gaze, he saw he had been wrong. It would take little, very little, to make Ryan pull the trigger.

"You wouldn't be smart to kill me here," Neally said. "Not with Sanger and his bunch in town."

"On the contrary," Ryan murmured, "it would be a very smart thing to do. I'd lose nothing, except a man I had expected to make use of, and Sanger would think more of me for having finished you."

Neally knew that what he'd said made little sense, but it had been the only thing he could think of at the moment. Beads of sweat came out on his forehead. He felt the tug of his stomach muscles as they knotted under the strain. He had never been in a position like this before, and the only reason he was in it now was because he had made a mistake in his estimate of Enoch Ryan.

The fat man kept his eyes on Neally, finger slack on the trigger. The silence ribboned out, one minute after another, until Ryan said, "I didn't expect to have to make a decision like this one. I thought you'd suspect Tarrant of killing Walsh and that you'd jump the rim bunch. Now, since you know, I have no choice. Then the only way to be safe will be to kill Ann. That's always the trouble with murder, one leads to another."

He would do it, too, without feeling, without scruples. Neally, reaching into his mind for anything that would stretch out the minutes, could think of nothing better than talk. He asked, "You and Walsh were partners. Why did you kill him?"

"The play was set up. I had no more use for him, so there was no sense in sharing the profits with him. Besides, I wanted

to get the fight started. That's the only way I could think of to keep Anchor T and the rim outfits from making a drive to the railroad. Sanger and his neighbors owe me money. If they don't sell their cattle for cash this fall, I can close them out."

Ryan tongued his cigar to the other side of his mouth. "All right, Neally. I can't sit here and think about this all day. When a man comes to a disagreeable chore, he might as well get it over with. Go to the door and open it. Stand there. I'll kill you if you make a move for your gun or try to run. Call Ann."

Slowly Neally got to his feet. He could refuse and die now or gamble on the next minute's giving him some kind of chance. He said, "You're crazy, Ryan, but not crazy enough to kill your own daughter."

"Sure, I'm crazy. Been crazy ever since Rawhide Hale rode me down in the street and smashed my leg. The sawbones took it off to save my life, but it would have been better if he'd let me die. At least, I'd have gone to hell with two legs."

HE SHOOK his head. "You're wrong, Neally, when you say I wouldn't kill Ann. Her knowledge is my one danger. She ceased to be my daughter when she disobeyed me. She saved you from a beating because I told her to. I wanted you to have all your faculties but at the same time, I wanted you to hate Tarrant and Sanger so much you'd take Anchor T and wipe them out. After that, I could foreclose on my mortgages and I'd own the rim.

"I can't understand what happened to her, unless she fell in love with you. She went against my orders when she advised you to leave the basin. Then to top that, she rode to your camp in the mountains to tell you the same thing. That was too much, Neally. Now, call her in."

It was easy to read the man's mind. He'd shoot Neally and then Ann. He'd draw Neally's gun and fire it once and say that Neally's bullet had killed his daughter.

Neally moved to the door and pulled it open. Then he knew he could stretch his life out for a few more minutes, and those minutes might give him the chance he wanted. Link Sanger and Mort Tarrant stood in the front of the store talking

to Ann and Judy. Tarrant was Ryan's man, and Ryan would see that here was a better way to handle a killing than to do it himself. Ryan had never come into the open; he wouldn't now if there were any way for him to avoid it.

"Ann, your father wants you," Neally said, carefully masking his tone as if this occasion were of no importance. "You looking for me, Sanger?"

Both the rim men wheeled, and a curse broke through Tarrant's thin lips.

Tarrant said, "You're damned right we've been looking for you. You're gonna swing. Then Far Western will know we ain't standing for no monkey business."

"He's got his gun, Mort," Judy Sanger cried.

"It's no good," Neally said. "Ryan's holding his iron on me. I ain't reaching for mine."

His spine felt as if a cold snake were crawling up it. If he had read Ryan wrong again, he'd get a slug in the back, but he was gambling that Ryan would run true to form.

There was a pause, Tarrant and Sanger standing motionless, both lacking the cold courage it took to push their play. Then Ryan, having weighed his choices, made the decision Neally was gambling on.

He called, "Neally said it right, Link. I knew you boys wanted him, so I took him when I had a chance, figuring you'd be along. Come and get him."

Stepping to the street door, Tarrant called, "Jake. Brock. Get in here."

They came from the Hoof and Horn, stringy, black-freckled men who looked enough alike to be twins. They would be the Vance boys, Neally guessed, the men Okeson had said would string along with Tarrant. Again the cold snake slid down Neally's spine. He had thought he could swing Sanger and his neighbors to his side, but Sanger alone on his side wouldn't be enough.

Tarrant led the way along the counter, Sanger behind him, the Vance boys bringing up the rear. The girls remained in the front of the store, Ann white-faced, Judy sober, but making no effort to stop Tarrant and Enoch Ryan.

Neally moved back into Ryan's living room, not stopping until his back was to the wall. He said then, "I know you're Ryan's hired man, Tarrant, and I reckon

them freckled-faced uglies you're dragging in are the same."

Link Sanger wheeled ponderously on Tarrant, his square face a mirror of surprise. "That so, Mort?"

"Hell, no," Tarrant snarled. "Get moving, Neally. I promised you a neck-stretching. Brock, lift his iron."

"There's one thing you need to know, Tarrant," Neally said softly. "It's a dangerous thing to throw in with Ryan. He kills you when he doesn't need you. That's what happened to Clint Walsh last night."

TARRANT looked as if he had been slapped. Even the Vance boys, slower of mind than Tarrant, blinked uncertainly as their minds gripped this news.

"He's lying," Ryan said in cold contempt. He had thrown back his blanket, his gun openly on Neally. "He was trying to shove that lie down my throat. I was in bed last night. Walsh was killed at the Anchor T, and you know I can't ride that far."

But it didn't go down. Tarrant continued to stare at Ryan, lids dropped over muddy brown eyes. He was a man born to trouble; it had been his living, but he held to an honor of sorts in his relations with men of his dark brotherhood. To him the murder of a partner was an unfortunate crime, and the knowledge that it had been done stirred doubts in him.

It was only a matter of seconds, but time enough for Neally to drive an opening wedge into the breach. He said, "Sanger, you've been told lies and part of the truth until you've got onto the wrong side."

Tarrant whipped his eyes to him. "Wrong side, hell. You're Anchor T, ain't you?"

"Walsh hired me to hold what Anchor T had and show a profit. Sanger, can I do that without keeping your beef out of the basin?"

"Sure," Sanger answered without having to think.

"All right. Then you've got your answer. You and your neighbors threw in with Tarrant and the Vance boys because you believed what they told you, and all the time they were playing Walsh's and Ryan's game. Who told you that I'd push you when I got here?"

"That's enough gab," Tarrant growled

and started toward Neally.

Sanger laid a big hand on Tarrant's shoulder and pulled him back. "I want to hear him, Mort. I've been wondering about some things, and maybe this hair-pin knows the answers. Tarrant told me what your caliber was, Neally. Said he'd cut your sign in Colorado, and Okeson got the same idea from Walsh's letter. Likewise what Far Western aimed to do."

Neally didn't risk a look at Ryan but he didn't think Ryan would use his gun with the room full of men. Neally's one chance for life was to keep talking until Jess Okeson got to town. That was a slim reed to lean upon, for Okeson might not come and he might not help if he did.

"I never saw Tarrant before, Sanger. What he knew about me he heard from somebody else. I thought at first it was Okeson but I know that's wrong. Jess is a square shooter, so it had to be Walsh. I didn't think of that, at first, but I should have. Walsh wasn't the first to doublecross a syndicate he worked for to fill his own pocket."

"Then Tarrant was working with Walsh all the time." Sanger shook his head. "Don't add up, Neally. No sense to it."

"Lots of sense," Neally hurried on. "The Far Western stockholders want to see a profit. Suppose we got into a finish fight. It might go on for months. We'd have to hire gunhands. We'd rustle your stock, and you'd rustle ours. We'd burn and shoot from ambush and raise hell any way we could. We couldn't get a herd south to Winnemucca to ship. Neither could you. What would happen? Back in Boston they'd say they'd bought the wrong ranch. Better take a loss than get cleaned out. Walsh would advise it. Send a gloomy re-

port back. Far Western would get an offer and they'd likely sell."

"Get him out of here, Tarrant," Ryan said testily. "Do your arguing in the street. Your petty troubles are no concern of mine."

"Maybe they are, Enoch," said Sanger, his mind reaching ahead of Neally's. "Neally said you killed Walsh. If Walsh schemed this range war up so you two could grab Anchor T, chances are you had your own little grab figured out, the same being our rim spreads."

"Never gave it a thought." Ryan made a grand gesture with his left hand. "I've loaned you money when you asked for it, Link. I gave you a hand when Hale shoved you out of the basin. I've carried you on my books. Now, you're believing a gun tramp's lying tales. I've heard enough."

"You've done all that," Sanger said through tight lips, "but you also pressed us in every way you could. High interest. Never give us more than a year. That was your way of getting back on somebody after Hale made you lose your leg. You couldn't handle the big feller, but you pretended to be our friend. All the time you was throwing a loop around our necks. I can believe you killed Walsh, 'cause I know you've ridden at night to see Tarrant. If it makes you so tired to ride a few miles, how could you get plumb up on the rim—"

X

EVEN as Neally had known it had to come, it happened then, but he had thought Ryan would play it out a little longer and that the storeman's bullet would cut him down. He had not known of

[Turn page]

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the feeling between Ryan and Link Sanger. Enoch Ryan had prided himself on loving nothing and thinking clearly but he had forgotten his hates, his fear of the truth. It was hate now that snapped the thread of his cold, calculating judgment or, perhaps, his fear of what Sanger was about to say.

Ryan's Colt roared. Sanger went down, plucking his gun as he went. Mort Tarrant drew, wheeling on Neally, and got Neally's first slug in his chest. He came forward a step, took a second wobbly one, and then life went out of him, and he fell.

Both the Vance boys clawed for their guns and brought them up smoking. Fast, but not fast enough to face Dan Neally. This was Neally's business, this was the part he had trained himself for, not the weighing out of half-truths and lies and choosing from them until he had the full truth, the running and dodging and ducking until the time was right. This, the smoky part, was what Dan Neally did best, and he took the first Vance boy out of the fight with a shot just above the nose.

It would have been over that quickly, for there was still time to get the second Vance if Ryan hadn't turned his gun on Neally. The bullet took him in the side like a paralyzing blow with an invisible club. He went to his knees, swayed there, blood a spreading warmth along his hip.

It seemed an age, that moment when Dan Neally struggled with his weakness, when his gun weighed a ton and he could not force enough strength into his thumb to prong the hammer back. He expected Ryan to fire again. Then there was another shot—from Sanger's gun, he thought, but he couldn't be sure. He had thought Sanger was finished, but no matter what had happened to the others, the last Vance was there in front of him, throwing down for the final shot, and he knelt like a man at prayer, waiting for that fatal bullet.

Then Neally had the reprieve which saved his life. Ann came into the room, running from the front of the store and crying for Judy to get the doctor. She saw how it was and grabbed Vance's arm. He cursed and struck at her, his left fist cracking her on the chin and knocking her away from him.

Only a few seconds, but they were enough, for fury finally gave strength to

Dan Neally. The hammer came back, the gun was held rock-steady, and he squeezed trigger. Vance was slammed back to the wall, coughing and choking until blood made a crimson froth on his lips. Then his feet slid out from under him, and he turned partly over and died, one arm thrown across his brother's body.

Neally fell on his face. He raised his head and pulled himself forward, fingers digging into the floor until his nails broke, tried to call, "Ann," but no sound came from his parched throat.

The stench of powdersmoke and blood was all around him; the horror of death was here, terrible and frightening. Then there was the pound of booted feet across the store and many voices and Jess Oke-son crying above the others, "I tell you, we had him wrong, Judy. Get the sawbones."

Day was gone for Neally then, and it was night, and his mind slept.

HOURS became days and days weeks, and Dan Neally lay in a bed at Anchor T, gaunt and delirious, talking wildly of the way he had been received in Red Bend, of the fear they had of him, of Gill's attempt on his life—of all the things that had fastened themselves in his mind. He talked of other things, too, of the lonely years that lay behind, of the violence and the waste of them, of his love for Ann and the bright dream it held. Then Ann would turn away to the window, knowing she should not listen and still wanting to hear.

There came a day when sanity returned, and Ann propped Neally up in bed, a shadow of the man who had ridden the stage into Red Bend. She brought a bowl of soup to him, and he ate with his eyes on her, holding back the questions that were in his mind.

When he was done, she said, "Judy and her father will be here this evening, and Jess is coming down from the mountains."

So he waited, sleeping through the afternoon. When they came, Jess held a letter, but he did not give it to Neally immediately.

He said gruffly, "Sure good to see you sitting up, Dan. Pretty close with you for a while."

"You've got a good nurse, feller," Link Sanger said. "Had a good one myself, or I wouldn't have made it." He motioned to

Judy. "I guess we can't complain."

"I've got some questions," Neally said, seeing that Ann was gone. "What about Ryan?"

"Dead," Okeson said, "but he lived long enough to talk a little. You had it guessed, Dan. Along with getting Anchor T cheap from Far Western, he aimed to grab the rim spreads so he'd have owned a circle of land above the rim and below it, too. Hell, they could run a million head in the Blackbow with that setup."

"Wonder why he wanted me to call on Tarrant?" Neally mused.

"Just to get the fight going. Figured Tarrant would take you and that would fetch me and the boys into it. Or if you got Tarrant, the rim bunch would start it."

"Why did Walsh come back?"

"To run the show. He figured you'd have the shooting started. The whole scheme was to get you so mad you'd start slinging lead. That was why they had it fixed for you to get a beating when you got off the stage. Likewise, Gill shot at you just to scare you. All his slugs was in the wall above the dummy. Walsh was fooled when he heard you'd lit out, so he came out to the spread to tell me to keep all the rim cattle out of the basin. Him and Ryan figured that would start things good."

"The first day I was in town Tarrant asked Ann if she was trying to help her pa grab their spreads," Neally said. "Seems crazy, him asking that, seeing as it was what Ryan was really figuring on."

"They was smart," Sanger broke in. "We'd had our suspicions about Tarrant, but tricks like that made us figure he wasn't in with Ryan. Smart, like the devil, Ryan was. A good man till Rawhide Hale ran him down. They'd been arguing about Ryan getting Anchor T's business, and Hale told him to go to hell."

"Ryan got out in the street to stop him, and Hale put his horse over him like he

would a stray pup. Ryan was never the same after he lost his leg. Brooding and hating everybody. Even Ann, I reckon. When he heard Hale wanted to sell, he got Walsh to come and look the place over."

"Maybe Hale was the cause of all of it, even if he was dead," Okeson said thoughtfully. "After he ran everybody else out of the basin, he let their cows winter down here, just to make 'em feel they owed their living to him." He pulled the letter from the envelope. "I wrote to the head office, telling about the fracas and sent your letter along. Just got the answer today. Damn it, Dan, it took us a long time to see you was on the level. We just heard too many good lies about you."

"I'm glad I didn't make my shotgun bluff stick," Judy said with unexpected candor.

Grinning, Neally nodded at Okeson. "What does it say?"

"Seems like they swallowed what you wrote about me being a good hand. Hell, I ain't no ramrod. Reckon Walsh gave me the job 'cause he figured he could run me. Now that you're all right—"

"Look, Jess," Neally said softly, "the job's yours. I don't want it."

"Pears like you'll do the hiring and firing, anyway. Says here you've got Walsh's job if you'll come back to Boston and talk to the big guns."

Ann was standing in the doorway, smiling a little. Neally's eyes turned from her to Okeson and Judy and went on to Sanger. Good, honest people, these rim ranchers, who wanted nothing more than a chance to make a living. There were a million like them. Well, he'd see they got the chance they were looking for around Far Western spreads.

"I was wondering," Neally said hesitantly to Ann, "if Boston would be a good place for a honeymoon."

"I think it would be a lovely place."



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*For over half a century the
Porters and the Skenes had been
at each other's throats—
but it was literally water over the
dam when the feud was ended*



I

TWO men stepped out of the door of the new Iron Point schoolhouse and stood where the light from within did not strike them as Ethan Skene and part of the Seven Up crew rode into the yard. Ethan saw them. He looked away, trying to locate the rest of his outfit, and in the second that his eyes strayed the two men were joined by three more.

He knew them well enough, and the careless attention with which they regarded him and his fellow late-comers to the dedication exercises and dance here at Iron Point did not need any explaining.

"Wagon Wheel," little Dib Hines observed laconically at his side. Ethan nodded, fully aware of the sudden tension of his men.

"Seems like everybody is here," he said

lightly. A burst of music came from within. "Appears we timed it just right to miss the speech-making," he ran on. "See anything of our boys?"

Half a dozen fires burned in the school yard, each indicating the headquarters of one outfit or another. Horses and little groups of men were gathered around them.

"Hiya, Seven Up! Hiya, Ethan!" fat, freckle-faced Pokey Malone called out from the Cross-T fire. "Your bunch is over in the corner. You better get slicked up in a hurry; dancing has begun."

"Won't take us long to get our hair greased," little Dib called back.

Ethan grinned. Seven Up had friends as well as enemies here.

At the Seven Up fire they found Chalk

at KICKING HORSE



"Don't give up!" Lana cried. "We've still got a chance!"

Isbell and the rest of the crew busily washing up and getting into their finery. All had come in from the roundup wagon in Shoshone Meadows, forty miles away, to enjoy this dance. But Chalk's homely face was singularly sober for such an occasion.

"Ethan," he said at once, "old Jube and his daughter are here—and the whole Wagon Wheel crew. They're packing their guns—"

Ethan nodded. "I'd expect them to. We'll do the same." All were listening now. "Any words been passed?"

"No," Chalk told him. "Everything's peaceful but kinda strained. I'd like to believe Jube Porter is just here to see that things go off without any trouble. He's got his fall shipping on his hands in a few days now."

"What he does is his own affair," Ethan said sharply. "But we don't want any trouble here, and for the same reason. We're getting ready to ship, too."

It was all he had to say. Someone had fetched a bucket of water from the pump. He washed and got his warbag from his saddle. The others did the same. All had shaved before leaving the wagon. In a few minutes they were attired in their holiday best and were as presentable as they had any hope of ever being. Through a solid phalanx of Wagon Wheel men they made their way into the schoolhouse.

The building was new, but the scene was a familiar one to Ethan, the long room crowded with rangemen like himself, girls from ranches all the way from the Owyhee headwaters to Kicking Horse, the county seat. Groups of oldsters ringed in the dancers.

BEFORE he had taken ten steps, Ethan found himself face to face with Jube Porter, the owner of the Wagon Wheel, a Virginian and looking it. A tall and robust man of commanding appearance, his hair now white and his strong nose grown a trifle sharp and hawklike with the passing years. In the moment that they confronted each other, Ethan Skene might not have been there for any sign that old Jube gave.

Ethan's eyes were equally blank. For almost half a century the Porters and the Skenes had been at each other's throats, fifty years of fighting that had taken the

lives of a score of men. Water rights, range, drift fence, even rustling, had figured in their quarrel, but the original cause of the Skene-Porter war had long since been lost in the gun smoke and hate. It no longer mattered. What a Skene did, a Porter could not approve and vice versa.

Ethan continued on around the schoolroom, his eyes hard and bright. He had been weaned on the principle that a Porter was never to be trusted, that they plotted night and day to wipe out the Skenes.

He had never seriously questioned it. As a young boy, he had taken up arms against them. In his time, Jube Porter's two sons had been killed, and his own brother had been brought home dying from Porter bullets.

Ethan was almost twenty-five now and he was still a Skene. But a moment later, when Lana Porter whirled by him in the arms of Homer Rains and he caught a glimpse of her fair young face and heard the warmth of her laughter, regret suddenly stabbed him that the gulf between them was so wide.

He had never spoken to Lana but he knew her as well as he knew Anne Gallatin, and some folks said that he would be marrying Anne one of these days. He knew Lana had been away for a long time. In some way she had changed since he had seen her last. It was as though some inner quality had come to the surface in her. She held a man's eyes and filled him with a strange humbleness.

Homer Rains was just an ordinary, run-of-the-mill puncher without any prospects but he was grinning from ear to ear and fairly bursting with pride, the way a man will when a girl has put him at ease.

"She hasn't come back thinking she's too good for ordinary folks, as some of them do," Ethan mused. "These are still her people."

With a start, he recalled that this was treason, coming from a Skene. It failed to disturb him, however, as he stood there. Anne Gallatin, dancing by, called to him.

"I'd almost given you up," she said. "My card is about filled, Ethan. I couldn't keep on saying no."

"That's all right," Ethan insisted. Contrary to public opinion, there was nothing between him and Anne. "I'll cut in when I can."

At these dances he never lacked a part-

ner. It was so tonight. Secretly, there were few girls present who would not have welcomed his attention. And on his own account, not because the big Seven Up spread was destined to belong to him some day.

Four or five dances later Ethan found himself with Anne again. "You're very glum tonight," she protested. "You haven't anything to say, Ethan."

"Sorry," he murmured.

"I've seen your attention stray in a certain direction a dozen times," she persisted. A smile touched Ethan's strong mouth.

"It's been as noticeable as that, has it?"

"It has—to me."

"I won't let it happen again," he promised.

"I should think not," Anne declared with feminine emphasis. Through the years, the Gallatins had always espoused the Skene cause. "After all, she is a Porter."

Ethan nodded. His gray eyes were far more sober than he suspected. Hands off! was the unwritten law where the Porters and the Skenes were concerned. He knew that included Lana.

"There couldn't be any exception to that rule, I suppose—"

Anne stared at him, horrified. "Ethan, there couldn't be!"

"Of course not," he agreed. His mood changed. "I hope there's a fried chicken in your basket and some of that famous Gallatin apple pie."

"Well, that sounds more like you," Anne declared with relief. "But we won't be eating for another hour."

"I'll be on hand when we do," he laughed.

The music ended, and another partner carried Anne off. Lana Porter brushed past Ethan, and their eyes met for a moment. Something ran between them in that brief glance that was not born of the hatred that existed between Skene and Porter.

II

ETHAN turned away and told himself it was nothing worth thinking about. And yet in some intangible way, the evening took on new zest for him, and he was

doubly glad he had ridden in to the dance. The minutes fled on wings, and when Hattie Simms struck a long chord on the piano and rotund Elon Hoffman, the chairman of the county commissioners, hoisted himself on the platform and announced there would be an intermission for refreshments, Ethan was surprised to find that it was already eleven o'clock.

Jube Porter left for home soon after the baskets had been emptied. Chalk Isbell found the old man's going momentous enough to send him around the room to acquaint Ethan with the fact.

"I know," Ethan said a little impatiently. "I saw him leave. No point in reading something into it that isn't there. Everybody seems to be having a good time."

Chalk was frankly surprised. "That don't sound like you," he complained. "You know Wagon Wheel is spoiling for trouble on account of the law suit. Now that the old man has left—"

"Stop it," Ethan said, and his tone was edged with annoyance. "You're as gloomy as an owl, Chalk. Can't a man enjoy himself for a few minutes without one of you popping up to remind him that he ought to be keeping his hand on his gun? Relax a little. If there's any trouble here tonight, we'll be the ones that start it."

Chalk was left standing there with a puzzled frown on his rocky face. Ethan had advised him to relax. The fact that he even suggested it was enough to produce the opposite effect in Isbell.

Wary and alert as an Indian, he weighed the situation for what it was worth—the Wagon Wheel crew bunched together near the door; Seven Up's riders sprinkled around the room; laughter and gaiety seemingly everywhere.

The undercurrents of tension he looked for were there, but they had been there all evening, and he could not detect any change. It made him wonder if he were mistaken, if his feeling that something was about to happen were only a trick of his imagination.

The music had struck up again. No one was on the floor as yet, however. Out of the corner of his eye Chalk saw Ethan standing by himself, his attention focused on the far end of the room.

Suddenly Ethan was crossing the floor with his long, free stride, and before he

had taken a dozen steps, Chalk Isbell's fears were realized. For Ethan was making directly for the cloakroom door where Lana Porter stood talking with Grandma Hoffman, the commissioner's wife.

Chalk knew it wasn't because he had anything to say to Grandma Hoffman that Ethan Skene was making for the cloakroom door. A moment, and there wasn't anyone present but knew it, too. Chalk found little Dib Hines at his side.

"Has he gone crazy, going up to her like that?" Dib got out hurriedly. "We'll have the roof falling down on us in a minute."

Chalk nodded but said nothing. His eyes were on the Wagon Wheel men. They had frozen in their tracks, and behind their alertness there was something in every stiff line of them that said they were not only ready but eager to resent any slight or humiliation Ethan Skene might dare to put on Lana Porter.

IN SOME incredible way the noise and laughter were gone so completely that they might have belonged to yesterday. The musicians continued to play, but the squealing of the fiddles seemed only to emphasize the stillness that suddenly swept the Iron Point school.

By now, every eye in the room was trained on Ethan Skene. As he stood before Lana he was a handsome figure of a man, tall and straight, his gray eyes alive and reckless in his young face. With a grace few suspected he possessed, he bowed to her.

"Miss Porter," he said, "might I have the honor of this dance with you?"

Men and women held their breath, stunned by his request and certain that Lana would say no and put him in his place. They were in no doubt as to what would follow. Guns would talk here tonight. They knew they should be thinking of their own safety. For the moment, however, they were helpless to do anything about it. A spell had been put on them, and they could only stare at Lana Porter and Ethan Skene.

They saw her regard him with a curious interest, the color coming and going in her cheeks. She seemed calm enough, with Ethan Skene's preposterous advance ringing in her ears and with the eyes of everyone in the room on her. They knew she

was alive to the significance of this moment as well as to its inevitable consequence and they told themselves that if she was slow to answer, it was only because she wanted what she said to be adequate and final.

But to their surprise, something flowed into Lana's dark eyes that was warm and friendly. A smile parted her lips.

"I'd be most pleased to dance with you, Mr. Skene," she said with calm self-possession.

The crowd gasped, and the musicians struggled frantically to pick up their lost tempo. The Wagon Wheel crew had a stricken look. Jube Porter's daughter dancing with the son of Morgan Skene! It was as though their world had blown up in their faces. Exchanging a bewildered look, they shuffled outside, needing a breath of air if ever men did.

Chalk Isbell and Seven Up's riders were no less aghast. "I never expected to live to see this," Chalk groaned. "I got to get out where I can think." The others followed him back to the Seven Up fire.

The dancing went on without them, couples hurriedly returning to the floor as the excitement waned. Lana and Ethan appeared oblivious to the glances directed at them as they glided away.

"Don't look, but every eye in the room is on us," Lana said. "We've made history here tonight, it seems."

"I hope so," Ethan replied. "It took me a long time to get up courage to ask you to dance with me. I've been wanting to all evening."

Lana smiled. "I knew you would ask me," she murmured. "I made up my mind that I would say yes when you did."

It was a brave start. A couple bumped into them, and Ethan's arm tightened about Lana. He felt her yield to its pressure.

"You've changed, Ethan, since I saw you last," she said.

"And you. You're not at all like you were when you first came to school in Kicking Horse." He shook his head over that old memory. "I was eighteen, and you were just a—a—"

"A gawky kid," she suggested, enjoying his sudden embarrassment.

BUT Ethan wasn't to be stopped. "You wore a green velvet dress," he said.

"I remember it. You had your hair done up in pigtails. Jim Hoskins told me you were Lana Porter. I would have known it without being told. You resemble your brother Tyler, and I hated you for that, on top of hating you for being a Porter."

His tone was sober abruptly. Lana nodded with full understanding. Ty Porter had killed Grat Skene, Ethan's eldest brother.

"As I remember it, I returned your feeling with interest," she said. Those old memories had put a catch in her voice. "That was a long time ago. Things have changed, Ethan."

They had whirled past the door and were far down the room before Ethan spoke again. "You mean you and I have changed," he said thoughtfully. "Your father and mine haven't changed a bit. They've fought too hard—paid too high a price for their foolishness—for anything to change them."

"I wonder," Lana mused. "At least, they've agreed to take this Crazy Woman Creek dispute to law. That's something." She shook her head reflectively. "What a time I had getting Father to agree to it instead of resorting to the usual way of settling a Skene-Porter difficulty."

Ethan laughed. "What a time you had?" he echoed with amused surprise. "What about me? I thought I could take credit for trying this matter with lawyers instead of guns." A moment later—and he was no longer amused—he said, "I'm not convinced that what a judge and jury say is going to be final."

Lana's smile did not desert her as she glanced up at him. "I know," she murmured. "I've heard that very thing said here tonight. I refuse to let it worry me too much, though. If we stand together, they'll have to listen to us. Promise me that I can count on you."

She was so near, and so lovely that Ethan would have promised her the world had she asked for it at that moment.

The music stopped, and the couples began applauding for an encore.

"I'm afraid I'd better let you go now," Lana said. "That Gallatin girl is looking daggers at me."

"That's meant for me as much as for you," Ethan said. "Anne just doesn't understand. The hard looks and the tongue wagging are things we will have to get

used to. Are you going to mind?"

"Not too much, Ethan."

It was all the invitation he needed to slip his arm around her waist and dance off with her. Across the room, Anne Gallatin told her partner that she had never seen anything so brazen. "That Porter girl has got him bewitched," she insisted.

III

NEXT morning, Ethan and Chalk were working the willow brakes below Shoshone Meadows when Hoke Emmons rode in from the home ranch.

"Your paw wants to see you right away," Hoke told Ethan. "He's chawing dynamite this morning, I'm warning you."

Hoke was the oldest of Seven Up's retainers and was a privileged person. Only on rare occasions was he out of old Morgan Skene's sight.

"All right, Hoke," Ethan answered, surmising what was up. "I'll be along. You needn't wait for me."

It was noon when Ethan rode into the Seven Up yard. He had never particularly noticed it before, but today for some reason he could not help remarking how bare and ugly the house looked, the uncurtained windows staring at a man like so many unseeing eyes, and not a flower or even a hop vine to cover the nakedness of the place. It was a man's house and it had been ever since his mother had passed on.

"You could tell that with half a glance," Ethan said to himself.

His father sat on the porch in his wheel chair. Old Morgan had not walked in ten years, due to some mysterious spinal trouble that had withered his legs and left him a mere shell of the man he had been. It had sharpened a temper and disposition that had never needed honing, but he had refused to let his infirmity incapacitate him where his business was concerned. He owned a dozen wheel chairs and had them sprinkled around the county wherever he was likely to have need of one. If Hoke Emmons were not present to wheel him about, he managed by himself.

Morgan's old eyes were fairly smoking as Ethan came up the steps and stood before him.

"So you were dancing with that Porter

girl last night," he blazed, his frail body shaking with anger. "There's been a dozen people here this morning to tell me." He paused long enough to look Ethan over from head to toes, as though he expected to find some sign of sudden insanity in him. "You don't appear cracked. But if you ain't, what excuse have you got for shaming me and yourself like this?"

"I haven't any need of an excuse," Ethan declared calmly. Long experience with his father's fiery temper had cushioned its effect on him. "If anyone has been shamed, it's the two-legged tongue-wagging tomcats who have such a good time watching the Skenes and Porters tangle that they don't want the fun stopped."

Morgan stared at him aghast, his faded old eyes wide with outrage. "And you dare to call yourself a Skene!" he cried, his voice quavering with fury. "I would rather have seen you in your grave than have had you do this to me! But I should have known. By Tophet, I've had warning enough! For years you ain't seen eye to eye with me. And I've listened to you—let you get around me.

"If I had done as I wanted to do, I wouldn't have any lawsuit on my hands now. I'd have settled that business in a hurry and I'd have settled it for keeps! What do I care about when that blasted secessionist filed his water rights? He ain't got a leg to stand on. Using a female to pull the wool over my eyes—that's what this means!"

HOKE EMMONS stepped out of the house and established himself in back of old Morgan's wheel chair. His presence caused them no concern, for they had no secrets from Hoke.

"Your dinner is on the table," the old cowboy said. Morgan glared at him.

"Let it stay there!" he snapped. "I'm talking." He gave his chair a hitch toward Ethan. "With the Owyhee power dam shutting off any chance of our getting water from the north, we need that creek and every drop of water we can get. I don't propose to have it wangled away from me, lawsuit, women, or nothing!"

"I know what the Owyhee dam is doing to the watershed," Ethan said patiently. "I was the first to point it out to you.

I talked going to law to you only because I know our rights on Crazy Woman must be established—and that doesn't mean hogging it and trying to hold it with guns. The day for that is past. Down in your heart, you know it."

"I don't know anything of the sort!" old Morgan screeched. "If this country has changed, I ain't!"

"I know it. Jube Porter hasn't changed, either. The two of you are still living back in the smoky years when you couldn't settle an argument until it was drenched with Skene-Porter blood. As far as I am concerned, there won't be any more of it."

Ethan knew what he was inviting in declaring himself so frankly. He saw his father stiffen in his chair. Old Morgan's thin, excited face was bloodless.

"So this is what that Porter female sent you home with!" he burst out fiercely. "You not only defy me but you mock me for what I've done to build up this outfit to what it is!" In moments of great stress, he had been known to lift himself out of his chair and stand tottering until he fell or someone caught him. He would have got up now if Hoke had not held him down.

"You want to tip your chair over and go pitching down them steps on your face?" Hoke scolded.

Old Morgan pushed him away and sat there breathing heavily for a moment. He pointed an accusing finger at Ethan.

"You had brothers, and they bred true! Sons a man could be proud of. But they're in their graves, and in my old age I'm left with you." He shook his head as his cup of bitterness overflowed. "I can't understand it," he muttered. "It's a curse that's been put on me."

Behind him, Hoke Emmons shook his head. This was sheer nonsense that old Morgan was giving tongue to. Ethan was his favorite son and always had been. Both were hewn out of the same tough timber. Hoke had never known either to give an inch when they met head on. He was not surprised to hear Ethan say:

"If they're in their graves, you know what put them and a dozen others there. As far as I can remember, I can't recall a time when a little common sense on either side would not have put an end to all the killing and hatred that's plagued

this range ever since you and Jube Porter first locked horns.

"I can see things for what they are. I'm not a kid any more. Neither is Lana. If you brought me in to warn me not to have anything more to do with her, you can save your breath, and I'll tell Jube Porter the same if he tries to stop me from seeing her."

"Ethan, I'm warning you, don't have nothing more to do with that girl!" old Morgan cried. "If you do, I'll cut you off without a cent." He was playing his last card, and there was something in his hooded eyes that said he realized it wasn't a very good card.

ETHAN did not hesitate over his answer. Without anger, he said, "That's a stiff price, but I'm willing to pay it. There's that much of you in me, anyhow." He started to cross the porch. "Before I left, I gave orders to start making the cut this afternoon. I'm going to get a bite to eat and head back. I'm needed there."

He stepped into the house, and old Morgan was left fuming to himself.

"Time you was thinking of eating something yourself," Hoke told him. "Grub's getting cold."

"Get away from me!" the old man growled at him. "I'm sitting right here. You see that he gets fed."

A few minutes later, in the act of setting a platterful of boiled beef and cabbage before Ethan, old Hoke flashed a glance through the uncurtained window and promptly dropped the platter with a bang.

"Look at that!" he managed to gasp. "It's Jube Porter! And I ain't seeing things."

Hoke blinked his eyes nevertheless, but there was nothing wrong with them. It was Jube Porter, all right, riding into Seven Up's yard for the second time in his life. His first visit—now a matter of more than twenty years ago—had been wreathed in gunfire. His wrath on that disastrous occasion had been no greater than it was today.

Ethan kicked his chair aside and started for the door. "They'll be popping away at each other in a minute," he exclaimed, thinking of the rifle old Morgan always kept loaded and in readiness

against the wall on the porch.

Jube came on until his horse was only a few yards from the porch. There he sat, for nothing could have impelled him to set foot on earth on Skene land. Old Morgan had sent his chair spinning backward to the rifle. Catching it up, he snapped a cartridge into the chamber and sat there, staring his hatred. Jube returned his scowling glare with interest.

Meeting face to face for the first time in years held both old men tongue-tied for a moment. Morgan was the first to speak.

"Well?" he snarled.

"Skene, you know why I'm here," was the blunt, razor-edged answer. "You know the disgrace that was put on me last night. I'm warning you, don't let it happen again. Keep that son of yours away from my daughter!"

"That won't be no hardship on him," old Morgan flung back. "He's a way too good for her."

"The Skene never lived that was good enough for my girl!" Jube boomed. It was like thunder over a canyon. "I didn't come here to waste words. You keep him away. Let him dare to show her any further attention, and I'll kill him on sight!"

Ethan stepped out on the porch. "I heard that," he said.

"Then it won't be necessary for me to repeat it," Jube retorted stonily.

"It wouldn't do any good to repeat it," Ethan said. "I propose to see Lana at the first opportunity and I'm going to keep on seeing her until she tells me she wants it otherwise."

Jube Porter's face took on an apoplectic hue as he heard himself so calmly defied. "I'm here to assure you she does want it otherwise," he said flatly.

Ethan shook his head ever so slightly. "I'll have to hear her say that," he said quietly. Turning on his heel, he walked to his horse.

Jube had never been so completely dismissed in his life. As he sat there, angrily puffing out his cheeks and with his mustache bristling, old Morgan's shrill cackling laugh reached him. The moment was almost too much for Jube. His hand started for his gun. Just as suddenly then, he wheeled his horse and dashed away at a slashing gallop, every line of

him sharp with hostility.

"What you grinning at?" old Morgan barked as Ethan pulled up in front of him.

Ethan shook his head. "I was just thinking," he said, "how foolish two old men can be when they set their heads to it."

IV

ARRIVING in Kicking Horse five days later with Seven Up's fall beef cut, Ethan found Wagon Wheel in possession of the railroad corrals. The railroad agent was apologetic, but his rule was: first come, first served. There was nothing for Ethan to do but hold his steers on the bed ground above town. It meant extra work and extra expense.

This was the first time the two outfits had been in conflict over their shipping. Seven Up's crew put it down as a deliberate move on Jube Porter's part.

"If there's any doubt of it," Chalk Isbell grumbled, "look at the way they're stalling along with the work. We'll be held up two days, and the trial opens tomorrow."

Ethan read the temper of his men and knew that it needed only a word from him to bring on a clash that would make the trial of secondary importance.

"It wasn't an accident," he admitted, "but we're not going to let it throw us off stride."

"You mean we're going to stand for this and do nothing about it?" Dib Hines demanded incredulously. "That was never old Morgan's way."

"It's my way," Ethan said.

He knew that holding his father in line would be quite another matter. Old Morgan reached town the following morning and let out a bellow of rage when he was apprised of the situation. By now, he had a score of men in Kicking Horse.

"Get 'em down to the railroad pens and throw that bunch out!" he ordered. "Do as I say and don't give me no excuses. To hell with this trial. I never was for it, nohow."

"All right—if that's the way you want it," Ethan pretended to agree. "It's certainly what Porter wants—getting us to play right into his hands. He's never been

able to outfight us but he's always known how to outsmart us."

He started for the door of the hotel room his father always used on his visits to Kicking Horse. Old Morgan stopped him as his hand closed on the knob.

"Wait," he said, his tone less certain. "We can talk this over. If there's a trick in this, what is it? What do you figure Porter's game is?"

"To drag us into a fight that will prejudice everyone against us," Ethan answered. "While we're busy spilling a little blood and proving that Seven Up doesn't take the backwash of any man, Porter will be nailing down his claims to Crazy Woman Creek. It will be a bargain for him at twice the price."

"Huh!" old Morgan snorted. He brushed Hoke's hand off his chair and wheeled himself to the window where he sat, glaring down at the street, his thin face furrowed with his thinking. "For once, you may be right," he said grudgingly. "You forget what I said. We'll let Porter do his shipping. Get word to Chalk that I don't want no trouble. If that devil-sired secessionist thinks he can do me out of that water by such scheming, he's mistaken."

Behind old Morgan's back, Hoke flicked a glance at Ethan that said, "Get going before he changes his mind." He could not remember when Morgan Skene had ever backed down before.

MASKING his satisfaction, Ethan stepped out of the room, but as he went down the stairs, a broad smile wreathed his face. He knew this was no minor victory he had won.

Riding out to the bed ground, Ethan found Chalk at the Seven Up wagon. The news he brought was not what Isbell wanted to hear, but an order was an order.

"Storming up in the hills," Chalk pointed out. "Pretty black up there. We'll get a good wetting before the day's over."

"It won't be the first time you've been wet," Ethan answered, studying the sky to the north. "Raining up there, all right."

Before returning to town, Ethan swung around by the loading pens. They were jammed with Wagon Wheel steers. Empty stock cars stood on the siding. The work should have been going on, engaging the services of a dozen men. He could dis-

cover only two, and they were obviously killing time. It was a studied invitation to trouble.

"And pretty crude for Jube Porter," Ethan said to himself. "Pulling his crew away is as good as asking us to do something about it. We'll sidestep this trap."

He was at the courthouse ten minutes later. Old Morgan and his attorneys had already entered. More than a dozen men, unable to find seats in the crowded courtroom, were gathered about the doors and on the steps. Kicking Horse and the surrounding country had turned out in force to witness the Skene-Porter factions tangling in their first legal encounter. Not only was it a novelty but it was calculated to be reasonably safer for spectators than one of their usual clashes.

Ethan recognized two Wagon Wheel men among those gathered just outside the door. They returned his opaque look without a flicker of expression. He knew the others were inside. He was not particularly concerned. Seven Up was well represented, too.

Turning, he saw Jube Porter and Lana coming up the steps. Jube saw him and would have hurried his daughter inside, but she refused to have it that way.

"Good morning, Ethan," she said.

Old Jube bristled, and the two Wagon Wheel men were instantly tense and alert. The warning was wasted on Ethan. All the Porter guns could not have stopped him now. Raising his hat, he stood there for a moment, warming under Lana's smile.

"Good morning, Lana," he murmured.

Something electric touched the air. Jube was having his threat rammed down his throat. But he was not in command here this morning. Lana took his arm and it was she who led the way into the courtroom. Jube went along meekly enough, aware of his impotence and trying to close his eyes to it.

The court was declared in session a few minutes later. Ethan took his place beside his father. The case was not to be heard by a jury, nor was the district judge to sit on the bench. Both sides having previously agreed, Judge Coleman Bonfield, who had been outstandingly successful in the adjudication of water rights in other parts of the state, had been called in to sit as master.

THE introduction of old records and much of the argument by counsel was of such a complex legal nature that before the morning was half gone, the crowd, losing interest, began to thin out. This was not what they had come for. Most of those who remained did so in the hope that old Morgan or Porter would be called to the stand.

It began to appear, however, that what they had done in the dim past and not what they had to say about it now was important here, for twelve o'clock came, and the attorneys for both sides continued to put old records in evidence.

The judge called the noon recess, and men were getting to their feet when Sheriff Kize Lapeer dashed into the room, his long legs churning. His excitement was enough to halt the crowd.

"Judge—men—there's been a cloudburst up north!" Lapeer shouted. "Dan Tuller just phoned in. The Owyhee Dam has gone out! Tore herself wide open 'bout an hour ago. We're going to get a lot of water down here!"

If he expected his news to create a panic, he was disappointed. The big Owyhee Dam was sixty miles away and was roundly hated by most of those present. In the days before the dam had reduced the Kicking Horse to a trickle, the river had gone on an annual rampage. It had always done some damage, but men had not been impressed then and they were not impressed now.

"I always said it would go out," old Morgan declared with his usual positiveness as Ethan walked along beside his chair on the way back to the hotel. "That dam may have helped folks living five hundred miles away but it never meant anything to this country. I'm glad she's gone out. They better not try to rebuild it. Same thing will happen again."

Ethan knew what he was thinking. With the Owyhee Dam no longer impounding water, Crazy Woman Creek was not so important to Seven Up. Leaving his father at the hotel, he crossed the street to the bank.

Lana's father walked in a few seconds later. He gave Ethan a glance that was packed with cold hostility. He properly supposed that his failure to bait Seven Up into a rash reprisal over the business at the shipping pens could be charged to

Ethan. Coupled with the incident on the courthouse steps, he had double cause for his wrath. But he said nothing. Cashing a check, he started out, but the bank door had barely closed behind him before he was back, and his face was suddenly white.

"Quick," he cried. "Upstairs! We'll be drowned in here like rats! There's a wall of water ten feet high roaring down the street!"

V

MEN rushed in, knocking Porter aside as they sought safety. The two-story bank building was new and the staunchest structure in town. Screaming, frightened horses tore free from the hitch-racks and dashed down the street. Light rigs and heavy wagons locked wheels and overturned or crashed into the posts that held up the wooden awnings and porches of the older buildings. Posts snapped off, and the overhanging roofs came thundering down.

Ethan took one look at the foaming brown torrent sweeping toward him faster than a man could run and knew he could not go back across the street to the hotel. In the bank, all was confusion. Tellers had left their cages and joined the mad stampede up the stairs to the directors' room on the second floor. Men were fighting one another to gain the advantage of an inch.

The flood reached the bank a second later. The windows crashed under its impact, and Ethan, halfway up the stairs, suddenly found himself in water up to his waist.

From the room above, a trap door led to the roof. In the haste to get it open, it was torn from its hinges. Men heaved sighs of relief as they climbed through the opening. The whole lower part of Kicking Horse was already under water, and the murky torrent was still rising. At the railroad bridge, south of the town, the water was within four feet of the tracks.

Several hundred men and women and children had found refuge on the rise that led to the bed ground. Nearer at hand, almost every roof was dotted with human beings. Across the way, on the second floor balcony of the hotel, Ethan saw his father and Hoke Emmons. Lana

Porter stood beside them.

For the present, they were safe enough there. The hotel was three stories high but it was an old frame building, and how long it and others of its kind could withstand the crushing onslaught of the flood was a question.

Ethan glanced at Porter. The old man's face was very sober. He tried to shout an encouraging word to Lana but he could not make himself heard above the roar of the river as it made the steep plunge into Singer Canyon, a mile away. The business street of Kicking Horse had become the main channel of the torrent. Horses and cattle swept past, some swimming frantically, others exhausted and helpless.

The battered roof of a small outbuilding floated by, a hen perched precariously on the ridgepole. The river, a swollen giant after having been tamed so long, seemed to revel in its strength, carrying along everything that its powerful fingers could rip loose.

Debris of all sorts dotted its surface. Presently uprooted cottonwoods that had been carried along for miles began to appear, their wet trunks bobbing ominously and shooting off at a tangent without warning.

One brushed against an upright that supported the hotel balcony, breaking it as easily as thought it were a toothpick. Ethan saw the balcony sag a little. The water was almost level with it.

A few seconds later, a tree struck the building next to the hotel. It collapsed like a deck of cards, tossing the two men on its roof into the water. Luck was with them, and they managed to clutch at the balcony railing as they swept past. Hoke dragged them to safety.

It was none too soon, for a spinning log shot toward them and struck the side of the hotel with force enough to tear a hole in it. The whole side of the building seemed to buckle. Ethan caught the groan that escaped old Jube's tightly pressed lips. Lana's father turned to him and the others.

"Gentlemen, we can't stand here like this!" he cried. "We must do something! The whole building is ready to cave in. Your father, Skene; my daughter—we've got to get a rope across to them and get them out or they'll be drowned!"

THERE were Seven Up as well as Wagon Wheel men on the roof of the bank. They nodded in unison, their partisan quarrel forgotten for the present. They had no rope, however, and there was none in the building.

"There's plenty rope next door if we can bust in," said Ethan.

They got a plank and smashed the sash out of a second-floor window in Oscar Romeig's hardware store. A distance of five feet separated the buildings. The plank became a bridge. A Wagon Wheel man crossed it. He was back a few minutes later with a coil of half-inch manila rope.

Men who were good swimmers volunteered to try to reach the hotel. Three attempts were made, and all failed.

"We'll never do it that way," Ethan declared. "We'll have to go up this side of the street three or four buildings so we'll have some chance of getting across before we're carried down too far. I'll try it now."

With one end of the rope tied around his waist and the other end held on the roof of the bank, he succeeded in making his way some distance up the block, jumping from roof to roof. Waiting only to find a clear spot, he leaped into the water and struck out with all his strength.

Halfway across, he barely avoided a tangle of drifting barbed wire and fence posts. With shouted encouragement from the roof of the bank to help him, he kept on and when he reached the opposite side of the street, he was still some distance above the hotel. Hoke caught him as he touched the balcony railing and pulled him in.

"You used your head that time," old Morgan greeted his son. "I could have told those boys they would never get across the way they was going at it."

But it was to Lana that Ethan turned. "It was brave of you, Ethan," the girl said. "But you shouldn't have risked it. We're all right here."

"I'm afraid not," he said. "The wall is buckling. I want to get you out as quickly as I can. We'll have to build a raft," he told Hoke and the others. "I'll start ferrying you across then."

The rope had to be fastened to something that was secure. Not trusting the rickety railing, Ethan passed the rope

through a window and out of the door that let into the hotel parlor. In the loop it made, he had a solid two-foot section of the wall. A heavy writing table that was all of twelve feet long occupied the center of the parlor.

"That's just the thing," Ethan told Hoke. "We'll turn it upside down. It'll float and will hold two or three of us."

With three men to help him, it was no trick to put the table on its back and carry it out on the balcony. Hoke shook his head as he eyed the swirling flood.

"Ethan, you'll never be able to hold on to that line," he warned. "It will be torn out of your hands before you've gone five feet." He tested one of the ornately carved legs of the table with his full strength. It appeared solid enough. "You better cut off a length of that rope and make a bridle. Loop it over the line and tie it to this leg. You'll have some chance of working across then, unless a tree hits you."

Ethan examined the table leg and found it securely fastened. "All right," he agreed, "we'll do it your way, Hoke."

It took only a minute or two. The table was lowered into the water then. It was buoyant enough even when Ethan stepped on it. Hoke lifted old Morgan over the rail and Ethan placed his father on the makeshift raft, cautioning him to hold tight.

"I don't need to be told what to do," the old man snapped. Up to that time Ethan had not seen him so much as glance at Lana. Now, to his surprise, he heard his father address her. If old Morgan's tone was gruff, it was not unkind. "If you've got any idea of going across, step lively," he admonished.

"Thank you, Mr. Skene," Lana replied, quite as surprised as Ethan that his father recognized her existence.

ACROSS the street, Jube Porter and the others on the bank roof, following every move, responded by drawing the rope taut and fastening it around the chimney. They could see that the wall of the hotel was buckling more and more and they knew it was only a matter of minutes before the side of the building caved in. The ominous creaking of timbers cried a warning to Ethan and the

three men left on the balcony.

"Don't wait out here for me to get back," he told them. "Run down the hall to the rear and stay there. If the wall goes, you'll still have a chance."

The table was awash under the combined weight of Lana, his father, and himself, but he was convinced that it would serve to get them across. A last word to Hoke, and he shoved off. By pulling against the taut line until he had a little slack in the noose, he could gain about a foot at a time.

By the time he had put a dozen feet between themselves and the hotel, however, the force of the current had become so great that it took every ounce of strength he possessed to make any headway.

"If I could only help you, Ethan!" Lana exclaimed as he rested momentarily. Before he could tell her that she could help him most by sitting where she was, a noise like a clap of thunder shook the air.

Ethan glanced back at the hotel and saw a puff of dust rise from the buckling wall. The next moment, with a splintering of timbers and snapping of boards, the whole side and front of the building collapsed. Instantly the tight line went slack and began to race through the noose. He tried to grab it, but its searing touch burned his hand to the bone. A second or two, and the severed end of the rope whipped past him.

Even as Ethan braced himself, the foaming flood caught the table in its teeth, spun it around crazily, and bore it away in its greedy grasp. Jube Porter's despairing cry came booming over the water. Ethan dropped to his knees. Catching a piece of driftwood, he began to paddle desperately, knowing that only a miracle could save them from being swept to their death on the rocks of Singer Canyon.

VI

DOWN the main street of Kicking Horse the raft careened, past the courthouse, past the school. Men on roof tops shouted words of encouragement but could do nothing to help them.

Suddenly the town was behind them. The mad roar of the flood as it plunged down the gorge of the old river bed was louder. Now, with nothing to dispute its

rush, the torrent gathered speed. The bobbing table was being swept to destruction faster than a man could run.

Ethan's driftwood paddle was useless. He tossed it away and steeled himself to glance at his father and Lana. Old Morgan sat hunched over, his chin on his chest, his heavily lined face expressionless and unafraid. It was as though he knew this was the end and was prepared for it.

Courage of a different sort burned in Lana's eyes, courage that mocked the whiteness of her face, for she still dared to hope that something would happen to save them.

Ethan winced as he read the unvoiced question in her eyes as she knelt before him, her wet clothes clinging to her and the water running up her arms as she clutched the side of the table.

"No, Ethan!" she cried, raising her voice to make herself heard. "Don't give up! We've still got a chance. We—"

She stopped abruptly, realizing that he was not listening.

"The bridge!" he shouted. "The water is almost up to the tracks!"

He turned to the trailing rope and hurriedly dragged it in and tied a noose in one end.

"It's this or nothing!" he called out. "I'll try to drop the loop over the end of a tie."

He got to his feet, the rope poised for the cast. The bridge seemed to be rushing toward him. His heart pounding, he waited. He knew he dared not miss.

Suddenly he flung the rope. His aim was true, and he felt the noose draw tight. As it did, he flung his weight on the rope to ease the strain on the table leg. Even so, he felt it wrench loose.

"Quick, Lana!" he yelled. "Climb up over me! Grab the tracks!"

The girl got her hands on the rail and with a boost from him drew herself up. Between them, they quickly had old Morgan safe on the bridge. Ethan swung up then, and as his weight left the rope, the leg tore out of its fastenings, and the table shot away toward the canyon.

As they rested, the wind carried to their ears a cheer from the crowd gathered on the slope, half a mile away. Ethan glanced back toward the bank. He could see the men waving.

"They know we're safe," Lana said. Something in her tone betrayed how tired and shaken she was now that the danger had passed. Ethan turned in time to see her sway wearily.

"Lana," he got out tensely. For a long moment they searched each other's eyes. Suddenly he caught her and swept her into his arms.

Old Morgan winced and looked away. But there was a look of resignation in his eyes. He knew a decision had been reached that neither he nor Jube Porter could alter.

RAIN began to fall in sheets as they stood there. Ethan lifted his father and picked his way across the bridge and up the tracks for a hundred yards. The railroad siding and the shipping pens were off to the right, below the embankment. The water had backed in over them, and only the posts of the loading chutes could be seen.

The Wagon Wheel steers had been trapped there. Many had drowned. The others were swimming frantically, unable to get out of the pens.

"Lookit that!" Morgan Skene screeched. "Set me down and do something. I don't care whose cows they are!"

"Ethan, you can't go down there," Lana protested. "You'll be drowned!"

Two men were hurrying toward them. They were Chalk and little Dib.

"Chalk, you and Dib take my father back to the wagon," Ethan ordered as they met. "I'm going to swim across there and open those pens." He turned to Lana. "Don't worry. There's no current in there. I'll make it, all right. You go with Chalk."

Lana shook her head. "I'll wait here for you."

As he had expected, Ethan had no difficulty in getting the gates open. Soon the frenzied steers were streaming up the bank.

It was late afternoon before the water began to recede. It dropped rapidly then, leaving the battered, mud-covered town exposed. Seated around the rear of the Seven Up wagon, old Morgan, Lana, and Ethan surveyed the scene. Save for the latter's rope-burned hands, they were no worse for their experience. As the water continued to drop, they saw a man leave

the crowd on the slope and head toward them.

"It's the preacher," old Morgan declared as the man came on, sloshing through muck and water up to his waist.

A few minutes later, and they saw that Morgan was right. It was the Reverend Willis. He was concerned about sending for help. There was a telegrapher at Valdosta, five miles east of Kicking Horse.

"Been attended to," old Morgan told him. "Ought to have a relief train here by dark. You better step over to the fire and get coffee and something to eat."

The minister mumbled his surprised thanks and crossed to the fire. Morgan Skene was not a church-goer. Furthermore, his expressed opinion of the Reverend Willis had been far from flattering. It made his present affability a little hard to understand.

Having a clergyman present had touched off an idea in Morgan Skene's shrewd, embittered mind. Hugging his withered knees, he sat there, exploring its possibilities. His hooded eyes began to burn with an unholy fire as he considered the measure of revenge it offered. Jube Porter would never get over it. It was a temptation old Morgan could not resist. He called Ethan and Lana closer.

"I'm a blunt man," he began. It was his only warning. "I know what the two of you have got in your minds, even though Ethan, here, may not have got around to popping the question. Well, I won't stand in the way. We've got the preacher here. If you're going to get married, let old Willis tie the knot. We can have it over within five minutes."

"Well!" Lana exclaimed, frankly embarrassed by his bluntness. "Why—why, I—"

"Don't bother to answer him," Ethan told her. The glance he directed at his father was angry. "The man is mad. He isn't thinking of us. He knows your father will be here soon. He wants everything signed, sealed, and delivered before Jube Porter gets here, so he can sit there and laugh at him."

Old Morgan glared his annoyance.

"Mad, am I?" he snapped. "Huh! You'll wish you had listened to me. Don't think that anything you've done today will make any difference to Jube Porter. I know him. He'll pack this girl off to a

convent or something—"

Three riders had swung around the slope and were pressing hard toward the wagon. They were familiar figures to Lana.

"Suppose we let my father speak for himself," she suggested. "He's coming now."

A FEW minutes later, Jube Porter, wet and mud-spattered, flung himself off his borrowed horse and strode up to them. He drew Lana into his arms.

"Thank the Lord you're safe," he said heavily. "I'll get you home directly." Ignoring old Morgan, he turned to Ethan. "Mistuh Skene, I thank you for so gallantly saving my daughter. It is not easy for me to stand here and acknowledge my indebtedness to you. But I do, suh. My steers were trapped in the pens. I don't know how many I've lost. We may not be too late to save some of them." He motioned for his men to ride on and reached for his saddle horn. "I'll be back as quickly as I can and take you home, Lana."

"Father, Ethan opened the gates. Most of our steers got out—"

Porter's head went back and up as though he had been struck. With the color draining from his usually florid face, he swung around and stared at Ethan. It was a bitter moment for the man's pride. He had humbled himself once, acknowledged his indebtedness to a hated Skene. To do it a second time was too much for him. The long years of strife and hatred were too sharp in his memory.

"I won't have it!" he cried, shaking with exasperation, "I'm capable of looking after my beef cut without any help from you."

Ethan appreciated the predicament in which Jube found himself, and the old

man's anger and seeming ingratitude did not fool him.

That was why he said simply, "It was an order."

"An order?" Jube roared. "Whose order?"

Ethan jerked his head in old Morgan's direction. "My father's."

Bristling defiantly, Jube Porter whirled on his ancient enemy.

"It wasn't no favor to you, Porter," Morgan growled. "I don't like to see cattle drowned thataway."

Hoke Emmons had trudged up and at this warlike talk, hurried to old Morgan's side. But Jube only glared his contempt and swung up into his saddle.

"I'll be back in a few minutes, Lana," he told his daughter.

"No need to hurry," Ethan spoke up. "With your permission, I'll see that Lana gets back to the ranch—"

"No!" old Morgan burst out shrilly. "If you've got to get anyone's permission before you can take that girl home, you're staying right here!"

At this violent and unexpected interruption, Jube swung his horse around on the proverbial dime. Shaking with anger, he glowered at old Morgan.

"So that's your game!" he cried. "You're going to keep these young people apart if you can manage it. Why, you old fool, I gave you credit for better sense. For forty years we've played our cards as we saw them and we always saw them different, but this is something we're not going to have anything to say about."

A strange, amused satisfaction dawned in old Morgan's eyes.

"That's the way I had it figured, Jube," he chuckled. "I just wanted to hear you say it."



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When the Texans came to Mormon country, all hell exploded

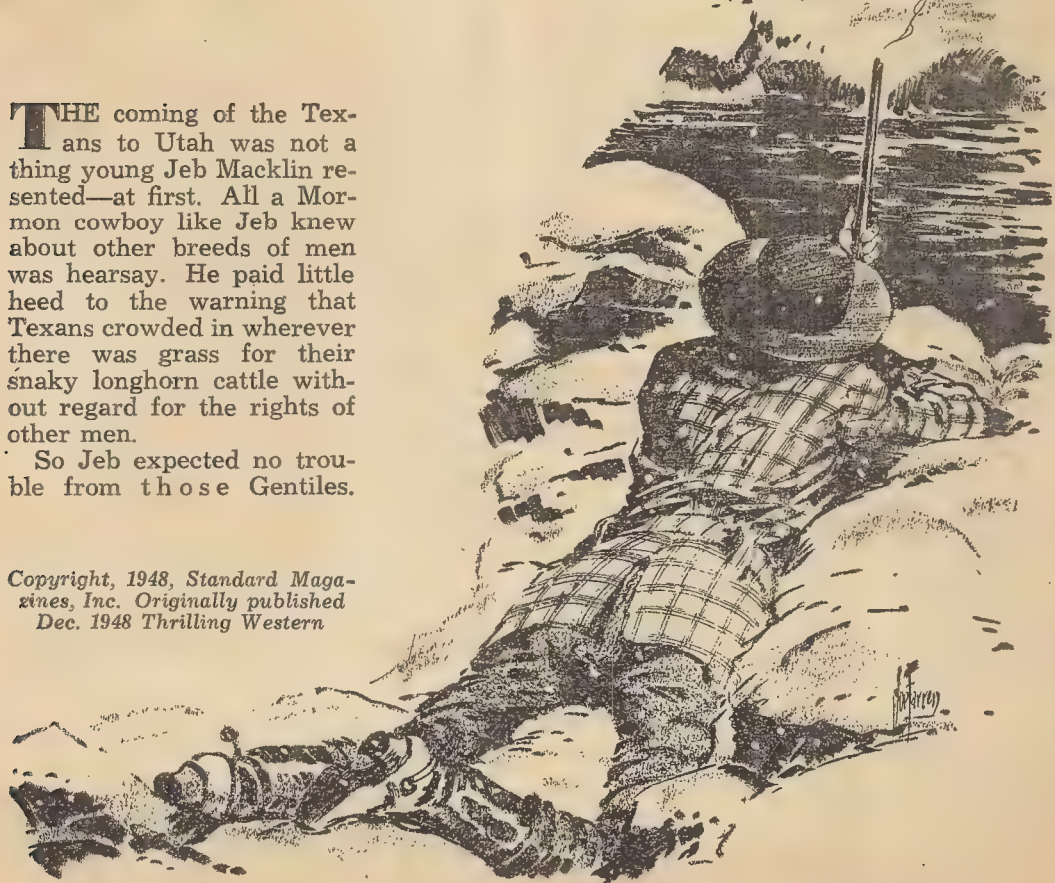
RIDERS of Purgatory Range

A Novel by JOSEPH CHADWICK

THE coming of the Texans to Utah was not a thing young Jeb Macklin resented—at first. All a Mormon cowboy like Jeb knew about other breeds of men was hearsay. He paid little heed to the warning that Texans crowded in wherever there was grass for their snaky longhorn cattle without regard for the rights of other men.

So Jeb expected no trouble from those Gentiles.

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Young Jeb Macklin Had a Lot to Learn—but

They had thrown cattle by the tens of thousands onto the great sage plain along the Utah-Colorado boundary, and some of their stock had drifted into the tangled canyons about Grand City, the heartbreak Mormon settlement on the San Juan.

But Jeb was in the remote Black Basin, living in a cave and riding herd on a rough three hundred head of cattle that he'd gathered in the piñon brakes.

They were white-faced cattle that had been thrown into the basin a year before and left to shift for themselves. Running wild, they'd grown gaunt and scrawny. The bulls hadn't gotten to all the cows, and so the calf crop was poor. Jeb had come into that back country in early spring. He'd worked through the furnace-hot summer, hunting the stock down like wild game.

He'd driven them by small bunches onto summer range, held them there. It kept him in the saddle from gray dawn to purple dusk, but the grass was good and there was plenty of water. When winter came, Jeb would drive the cattle into some lower sheltered canyon where there was sun-cured grama and buffalo grass.

Jeb was branding what few calves there were. Every third calf he burned with his J M Connected brand. That was his deal with Cletus Ryerson, the Grand City merchant, who owned the cattle. That was all the pay he would get for living like a hermit and doing a full crew's work.

Back in the settlement, when he had started out with his dun saddle horse and his pinto mare packed with camp gear and provisions, some men had told Jeb that he was getting the short end of it.

Sometimes, mostly at night in his rock cave, Jeb figured that he was. But in the daylight, when he could see his calves, he felt different about it. This was his start. He was young, he had time.

He knew it would take a long time and plenty of hard work. But Jeb Macklin came of a people who were patient, industrious, and accustomed to hardships. He hadn't bargained, however, on the Texans.

wagons—a dozen of them. They rode with rifles in their saddle boots and six-shooters belted to their thighs and they rode boldly like men who regard the earth, where it was grass, as their own.

The dust raised by their coming lifted in a great cloud, roiled up by thousands of hoofs. Uneasiness grew in Jeb. He drew his Winchester, his only weapon, from its scabbard and made sure it was loaded. He surveyed his herd, scattered in small bunches over the grass flats—and waited.

The Texan herd bore down on him like a horned juggernaut. Four riders broke away from it, came toward Jeb at a lope. The big man in the lead obviously was the outfit's boss. He rode a fine black gelding, and the man himself had a black look. His hat, under its film of dust, was black. His growth of wiry whiskers was black. So were his heavy eyebrows and the shock of hair that was revealed when, reining in, he pushed back his hat. His gaze struck out at Jeb Macklin.

"Faber's the name—Matt Faber," he said flatly. "From Texas. We've come a long ways, friend. Folks along the Colorado line told me I'd find a good range here. They didn't say anything about it belonging to anybody." He gestured across the flats. "Whose white-faced cattle?"

"Some are mine," Jeb said. "Most belong to Cletus Ryerson."

"That all of them?"

"That's all. About three hundred head."

"Mormon cattle, eh? How many men with you, friend?"

"My name's Jeb Macklin, and—"

"All right, Mister Macklin," Faber broke in. "How many men?"

Jeb's uneasiness grew. He moistened his suddenly dry lips.

"I'm alone, Faber," he said.

Matt Faber said, "That's all I wanted to know," and gestured to his three men. They were a hard-bitten trio, hairy and dust-grimed. "Go to it, boys. You know what to do." He never took his gaze off Jeb.

"I'm scattering your herd and taking over your range," he announced. "And I'm warning you—go easy with that rifle. You've got no chance, friend."

ACROSS the plains they came with a great heard, a big remuda, and two

He Learned Plenty Fast When the Heat Was On!

Jeb's uneasiness was replaced by rage. He shouted that nobody could handle him like that and swung his rifle up. But a Winchester was too clumsy for such close range. Matt Faber drew his six-shooter, at the same time giggling his horse forward.

The rifle never lined up on the burly Texan, for Faber clubbed down with his



JEB MACKLIN

gun—and Jeb's flat-crowned hat didn't cushion the blow at all. The second blow fell, and Jeb's head felt split open.

The rifle was wrenched from his hand, and he grabbed at the saddle horn to keep from falling. He saw Matt Faber, laughing uproariously now, through a red-black mist.

"Fancy him, trying to throw down on me—Big Matt Faber from San Antone!" Faber yelled. "Him, a Mormon cowpuncher not dry behind the ears!"

"What do you aim to do with him?" one of his men asked.

"Tie him on that cayuse," Faber ordered. "Point it south and get it moving—fast."

THE three riders crowded in on Jeb, and he, dazed, couldn't even struggle. They tied his hands to the saddle horn, took his lariat and bound his feet by running the rope from one ankle to the other under the dun's belly. They knotted the dun's reins and looped them over the horn.

"You, Charlie," Faber said, "get him started on his way."

Charlie took the end of his rope and cut the dun hard across the rump, at the same instant letting out a wild yell. The dun spooked. Charlie rode after it, lashing it again and again.

He followed for more than a mile before letting up. By then, Jeb's mind was cleared, and the danger he was in filled him with panic. South of the basin, there was only empty desert.

It was well done, that tying job. They'd bound Jeb so tightly that there was no slack, no give to the bonds, and the rope cut deep into his wrists, and his hands began to swell. His head ached throbbingly, and his vision didn't quite clear.

He could guide the dun, however, with the pressure of his knees—only there was nowhere to head the horse. The sun was a weight on Jeb's shoulders, and thirst became a tightening clamp inside him.

Horror gripped him. He could see himself dying by slow degrees. His horse would go first, no doubt, and fall with him and pin him down. Unless, he thought, I can keep him moving to water. But out on the wasteland were few water holes, and this was the season when those few were apt to be dried up.

Gradually, as the sun lowered, Jeb's fear turned to a dull sort of rage and the rage to hate. He began to tell himself: If I meet him again, I'll kill him! Somehow he was going to live—and face Matt Faber once more.

The sun sank below the sandrock uplifts to the west, and dusk crept into the low places and behind buttes and jagged rock spires. It was that time of day when the harsh land seemed most like a rock jungle to Jeb Macklin. Always before it had seemed safe, but now it was a trap.

Jeb was still resolved to live, but his hope ran thin.

II

DARKNESS came, but the horse and its helpless rider came to no water. The animal, however, pricked up its ears, quickened its gait, and then Jeb saw the glow of a campfire.

The dun carried him directly toward the fire. Shapes formed—a herd of cattle, a chuckwagon, horses in a rope corral, men.

Jeb called out, "Hello, the camp!" and a man shouted back at once, "Hello, come on in. Chuck's about ready."

A man stepped forward to meet Jeb, a bearded man, small of stature. He stared at Jeb, a question in his eyes. Two others came forward to stand beside him, one of them a girl in man's clothes. A clammy thought came to Jeb Macklin, and he said thickly, "Who—who are you?"

"I'm Sam Eldredge," the bearded man said. "From Texas."

Jeb said, "Texans! making an oath of it."

Jeb could see another man between chuckwagon and fire. Riding night herd was yet another. A small outfit, compared to Matt Faber's, but still a Texan outfit—and on its way into Black Basin. His ugly feelings must have shown on his face, for the three people facing him looked uneasy.

Sam Eldredge said, "Fred, cut him loose," and the man took a jackknife from his pocket and stepped forward. He cut Jeb's hands free but untied the lariat binding his feet. He coiled the rope and hung it on Jeb's saddle horn. Jeb rubbed his aching wrists.

"I'm obliged to you," he said. "I'll ride on."

"You were invited to eat with us," Eldredge said. "You'll stay."

"You Texans sure know how to order a man around," Jeb shot back, his temper flaring. "How do you figure on making me stay?"

Eldredge gave his rider a look. "All right, Fred," he said mildly.

Fred, a rail-thin man with a dour face, drew his gun. "Get off that horse, friend, or I'll shoot it from under you."

There was a metallic click as he cocked the gun.

Jeb figured that Texan water would sicken him and Texan food choke him.

They didn't. He drank from the water barrel on the chuckwagon and he ate his fill of the food dished out by the lame oldster called Tobie. He saw that these Texans were different, more like his own people.

Fred Gable stripped and rubbed down and watered the dun. Sam Eldredge was no Matt Faber. He was a soft-spoken, mild-mannered man. The girl's name was Linda, and she was Sam's daughter. In a dress, she wouldn't need to take a back seat for even the prettiest Mormon girls. Her father called her Lin.

THE meal over, Jeb said, "I'm mighty sorry. I shouldn't have talked like I did before knowing you were different from Matt Faber and his hands."

"So Matt Faber did that to you?" Eldredge said. "Well, Matt's a little too wild. A man who's always got to ride roughshod over other men. Why'd he tie you on your horse?"

Jeb told them about his encounter with Matt Faber.

"It's not fair," Lin said indignantly. "There must be room for all of us. Dad, can't you reason with Matt?"

"It'd do no good," her father said. "Nobody can reason with him." He looked back at Jeb and explained, "We were neighbors in Texas, Matt and I, and both of us lost our range because of lease trouble with the state grass commission. All we could do was find a new range, but wherever we went—western Texas, New Mexico, Colorado—the grassland was taken up. When we heard about this part of Utah, we figured it'd mean a new start for us."

His words renewed the anger which burned so fiercely in the young Mormon cowboy.

"Well, Matt Faber's got his new start," Jeb said bitterly. "And he's got my cattle."

"What'll you do about it?"

"Head for Grand City and get some help."

"That'll make trouble between the Mormons and us Texans," Sam Eldredge said worriedly. "But it's a thing you've got to do, son."

Jeb said, "I'll try to keep you folks from being bothered. I owe you that much." He rose and added, "Thanks for chuck. I'll ride on now."

Eldredge said, "Stay the night, rest your horse. You've a long ride ahead of you."

Jeb hesitated. The quicker he reached Grand City and got help, the quicker he could settle matters with Matt Faber. Then he happened to glance at Lin Eldredge and caught the slight nod she gave him.

Why she should want him to stay Jeb couldn't guess, but he felt an odd tingling excitement, meeting her gray eyes. Never before had he experienced anything quite like it and he had known quite a few Mormon girls.

"All right," he said. "I'll stay."

In the morning, after breakfast, Jeb found out why Lin Eldredge had wanted him to stay.

She sauntered over to him when he was saddling up. She had waited until her father had ridden out to help his two riders get the herd—which was only about five hundred head—strung out on the trail. Slim as a boy in her shirt, levis, and half-boots, Lin stood with her hands in her pockets and watched him. Her broad-brimmed hat hung on her shoulders from its chin cord, and the desert wind tousled her honey-blond hair. Her eyes were gray, her skin smoothly brown from the sun and wind of a long trail.

JEB'S cheeks grew warm under her scrutiny. He thought her bolder than the Mormon girls he knew. The dun saddled, he faced her.

"You wanted to talk to me?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," the girl said. "I wanted to ask you to grant me a favor."

"Well, anything I can do," Jeb told her quickly and meant it.

"It's your trouble with Matt Faber," Lin went on. "Both Dad and he had trouble back in Texas—plenty of it. I guess it's made Matt bitter—and hard." She paused, seeing Jeb's face tighten up.

"Oh, I'm not saying Matt did right by chasing you out of Black Basin," she went on. "And I'm not asking you not to get your Mormon friends to help you get back what is yours. This favor I want— Well, Matt may not listen to reason when a man tries to talk to him. But he may listen to me."

"To you?"

"Matt Faber will do most anything I ask him."

"Oh," Jeb muttered, feeling something tighten up inside him. "So that's how it is. You and Matt—"

"That's *not* how it is. Not yet, anyway. I'm not promised to any man. That leaves me free to ask a favor of you."

"I sure can't stop you from talking to Matt Faber about anything," Jeb said sourly. He'd met this girl only last night and here he was, being peeved because she was friendly with that hardcase Texan. "You'll have plenty of time," he added. "It'll take me more than a week to get back there."

"But you'll see me before you see Matt?"

"All right. I'll see you first."

"Well, thanks."

"You don't owe me any thanks," Jeb said and swung to the saddle.

He rode away without saying good-by, but something made him look back when he topped a rocky rise a quarter of a mile away. Lin Eldredge was still standing there, gazing after him. He carried her picture with him, etched deeply in his memory.

III

IT WAS ten years since the colonists sent out from Salt Lake City had founded Grand City. There had been more than two hundred and fifty of them, with eighty-odd wagons. They had built a small fort of sandrock and one-room cabins of crooked cottonwood logs.

They'd built dams, dug ditches for irrigation—and the violent San Juan had wiped out their work half a dozen times. The red-and-white cliffs towered about the settlement, the sun seared it, and sandstorms lashed it.

Now, as Jeb Macklin rode in, Grand City was smaller than at the time of its birth. There were fewer people, for some of the settlers had departed when hope died. There were empty cabins, rapidly falling apart. But the ones still occupied had been enlarged, and Cletus Ryerson's store was a plank building. Artesian wells now watered the small patches of farmland. Fields of alfalfa were bright green against the monotonous red of the sandy flats.

Jeb lifted his hand in greeting to the farmers, touched his hat to the women,

and forced a grin for the youngsters who called out to him. But without pausing to talk, he headed for Ryerson's store.

Three saddle horses stood at the store's hitch-rack, and Jeb knew that three of the cattlemen who grazed small herds in the near-by canyons were in town. That was in his favor, for such men would be inclined to give him a hand against Matt Faber.

He dismounted, strode into the small, stock-cluttered store. The three ranchers were talking with big, black-bearded Cletus Ryerson. Their talk stopped and they turned to face Jeb.

"We've been expecting you, Jeb," Ryerson said. "Trouble?"

"Some Texans jumped me," Jeb said, anger back in his voice. "They scattered the herd and took our graze. I did the best I could, but—"

"We know that," Ryerson broke in. "When we heard about those Texans heading into Black Basin, we knew they'd run you out. What chance have we got against them?"

"Chance enough," Jeb replied, "if we want to risk a fight."

Ryerson, a man of sixty-odd years, had come to Utah as a youth with the early Mormons. He had fought a bitter nature and hostile Gentiles all through the early days and now he had no heart for bloodshed. But as he talked, he thoughtfully stroked his bushy beard, and an angry fire kindled in his eyes.

"It's more than a matter of a few hundred head of cattle," he said, trying to make up his mind. "If we let one group of outsiders push us off our land, others will come and be even bolder."

"We've got to show this Matt Faber," Jeb said.

"The land will do that for us if we wait," Ryerson told him. "Those Texans don't know how to raise cattle on land like this. They turn their herds loose, let the critters shift for themselves. They don't realize that here cattle have got to be driven to pasture—the high ranges in summer and the sheltered canyons in winter. Their stock'll wander into the cedar brakes, and the calf crop will be poor. When winter comes, Matt Faber's herd will starve up on that Black Basin range."

"And our cattle, too, unless we get them back," Jeb said.

"That's true," Ryerson said, and suddenly made up his mind. "We'll have to arm ourselves and ride north. How many men in Faber's outfit, Jeb?"

"A dozen."

"We'll take a few more than that and maybe, by outnumbering them, avoid bloodshed," Ryerson decided. "We'll take the trail in the morning."

FIFTEEN men rode out of Grand City in the gray dawn, each armed with six-shooter and rifle. Three pack horses, loaded with camp gear and provisions, were taken along.

Despite the early hour, the people of the settlement turned out to see them go. There were a dozen girls of marrying age in Grand City, and some of them had eyes for the lanky, yellow-haired Jeb Macklin.

But Jeb remembered that jeans-wearing Texan girl and knew that she alone would fit into his life. And if he could not have her? The question formed in his mind. Jeb didn't like it.

The band traveled steadily north and at noon, stopped in a rocky waste, watering their horses and themselves from their canteens. That night, they camped by water close to a high ledge honeycombed with the ruins of some prehistoric pueblo.

At dawn, they were in the saddle again. At midday, the band struck the broad trace left by the two Texan herds. That night in camp, Jeb told Cletus Ryerson about the Eldredge outfit—and about Lin Eldredge.

"So you played it foxy," Ryerson said, grinning through his beard. "Instead of seeing what the girl could do with Faber, you brought us out to make sure."

"I don't figure the girl can change Faber's mind any."

"It's all right, Jeb," Ryerson said. "When I was young, I'd have played it that way." He gave Jeb a shrewd look. "This girl, she took your fancy?"

"Well, sir—"

"Too bad," the older man said, seeing the telltale signs on Jeb's face. "But Texans won't let their womenfolks marry Mormons, son." He reached, laid a friendly hand on Jeb's shoulder. "Better forget her," he advised. "You can have your pick of most of the settlement girls, and they're your own kind."

Jeb nodded glumly. . . .

AT SUNDOWN the next day, they sighted the Eldredge camp and headed for it. Sam Eldredge had picked a small canyon for his home site and he and his three men were cutting piñons from the slopes for a cabin. Jeb's eager gaze found Lin immediately.

She was busy at the fire by the chuckwagon, cooking the evening meal. She wore a green gingham dress and an apron, and her dark blond hair was fixed prettily atop her head. She was mixing sourdough biscuits when Jeb reined in and dismounted.

He wanted to tell her how wonderful she looked. "You talked to Faber?" he asked, and his voice was harsh.

"I talked with him," Lin said calmly. "He'll be reasonable."

"Well, that's one more thing I'm obliged to the Eldredges for."

"I merely wanted to avoid trouble between you and Matt."

"Sure, I know," Jeb said. "For his sake."

Lin gave him a smile that could have meant much or nothing at all and went on fixing the sourdough. She was under twenty, surely, yet Jeb Macklin had the sudden feeling that in some ways she was wiser than he.

He felt irritated, too, without knowing why—unless it was because he knew that she had seen Matt Faber.

Jealous? Jeb had never experienced that murky emotion before and he denied it now.

"We'll find Faber and make sure he'll be reasonable," he said and turned back to his horse.

He was annoyed even more when Lin said, almost smugly, "Oh, he'll be that. He gave me his word."

Jeb returned to the Mormon band and found Cletus Ryerson talking in friendly fashion with Sam Eldredge. Matt Faber was setting up permanent headquarters about seven miles north, Eldredge explained, on the west side of a sweetwater creek.

Faber claimed that he had located on a good water supply and fine graze.

"He's well pleased," Eldredge said in his mild voice.

Ryerson glanced at Jeb. "Your range, eh?"

Jeb nodded. "Miss Eldredge says she's talked with Faber," he said. "She thinks

he'll back down. But we'd better watch out. He's not the sort to give up what he's got without a fight."

"We'll soon find out," said Ryerson.

The band rode north, and darkness closed in about them. They passed scattered bunches of longhorn cattle—Eldredge's cattle—and Ryerson gave Jeb a satisfied look.

"They'll let their stock rustle," he said. "Maybe a month from now the streams'll give out, and cows will die of thirst. If the water holds, like Faber figures, then the winter will do for them."

"It'll be too bad for the Eldredges."

"Yes, too bad," Ryerson admitted. "Sam Eldredge seems all right."

THEY saw the glow of campfires ahead, and soon after reached the creek Faber had boasted of to Sam Eldredge. It was a broad but shallow stream, so shallow it was hardly above a horse's hoofs.

The Mormons knew it for a deceptive flow. It originated in the mountains to the east, disappeared into the sandy wastes to the west. It could dry up almost over night. Then a cattleman would be forced to drive his stock, in small bunches, to water holes and the little canyon streams.

Fording the stream, Jeb and his companions saw that Faber had had a wagon out to the cedar brakes. His crew had cut posts for a corral. The Texans had also gathered some of the basin's plentiful rocks, evidently intending to build a stone house.

The burly Matt Faber strode forward to meet the visitors. He'd left off his gun, and his men remained where they were by their fires.

"Welcome, friends," Faber said heartily. "Step down, rest your saddles. Chuck's on, and there's enough for all of us."

"We didn't come out here to eat off you, Faber," Jeb said. "We're after our cattle. Yes, and our range, too."

"We can dicker better on full stomachs," Faber said. "Right, boys?"

He put it up to the Mormons as a group and he had judged them shrewdly. They had not eaten since midday, and the majority were hungry for food other than trouble.

"Sure, that's right," one said, and several dismounted.

IV

JEB saw what Faber was up to. The Texan was trying to make himself appear a good fellow. He wanted to make the visitors believe that he wasn't the sort to gun whip a man and turn him out onto the desert tied to a horse. Cletus Ryerson must have read Jeb's mind.

"Take it easy," he said, low-voiced. "Let him play it his way."

"I don't trust him," Jeb muttered.

"Nor do I," said the black-bearded man. "But we've got him outnumbered, and he'll play it safe."

Jeb nodded jerkily. He'd play it that way but he wouldn't forget what Matt Faber had done to him, not until he had paid him back with interest.

The Texans' cookie dished out mulligan stew, sourdough biscuits, and coffee. Perhaps, as Matt Faber had figured, nothing put men on friendly terms as quickly as having chuck together.

Jeb played it as Cletus Ryerson had advised, but anger took the edge off his appetite. The angular-faced Charlie came up to Jeb, slapped him on the back, and said:

"No hard feelings, eh, bucko?"

Jeb didn't say anything. It had been Matt Faber who had ordered Charlie and the others to tie him on his horse and chase him out onto the desert. But Charlie hadn't protested against the order.

With chuck stowed away, Faber rolled and lit a cigarette. His dark face wore a grin, but his eyes were wary.

"A man makes a mistake now and then," he said, talking mostly to Ryerson. "Maybe I did go off half-cocked, but Macklin, here, tried to throw down on me."

"After you said you were scattering my cattle and taking my graze!" Jeb muttered.

"You've got a bad temper, friend," Faber said. "I told you I'd do that *after* you grabbed for your rifle. When I rode up, friendly-like, I said there was plenty of range here for the two of us. But you—"

"Faber," said Jeb thickly. "you're a liar!"

"See, Ryerson? He's hot-headed."

Ryerson was stroking his beard, and his eyes were chill. "One man's word against another's," he said slowly. "We'll let it go at that. Jeb, let this thing drop. You, Fa-

ber—what about our cattle?"

"My crew will round up your herd."

"And the range?"

"I'm here to stay," Faber replied. "But that's not saying your cattle can't graze here. You brand your calves, and I'll brand mine, and there'll be no trouble at roundup time. You agree to that, and my boys won't have to make a gather of your stock now."

"We'll take the gather," Ryerson said. "And we'll let you have the range. But only because I don't want bloodshed."

"That's backing down for him," Jeb muttered. "I don't like it."

"I don't like it, either," Ryerson told him. "But that's how it's going to be." He rose, a tall and wrathful patriarch. "Start the gather tomorrow, Faber," he ordered. "You're getting off easy. If Macklin had died from being turned out onto the desert tied on his horse, I'd have come here with fifty men, and by now you'd be dangling from a rope."

He turned away, calling to his men, and Jeb followed him.

They made camp half a mile away from Faber's headquarters.

The white-faced cattle had been scattered back into the cedar brakes at the west of the basin, and it took Faber's crew the whole of three days to gather them.

RYERSON didn't let his men take a hand in the brush roundup. They merely held the cattle on a grass flat as the animals were driven out. The tally came to three hundred and twenty head when Ryerson said, "You satisfied, Jeb?"

"The tally's close enough," Jeb replied. "But I'm sure not satisfied with letting Faber have this Black Basin range."

"Just wait until there's a drought or until winter hits this herd," Ryerson said. "The land will work for us. We'll throw our stock back east, beyond the range Eldredge is grazing. That's still a part of the basin."

"All right," Jeb grudgingly consented. "But if Faber ever tries to crowd me out of there, so help me, I'll use a gun on him!"

The Mormons strung the herd out, pointed it east, and Jeb rode over to his cave. He found his pinto mare, packed his gear and what remained of his provisions, and headed after the herd.

The herd crossed onto the Eldredge

range at noon the next day, and at sundown a stop was made within a mile of the spot where Sam Eldredge was establishing his ranch headquarters.

A rider came jogging up, and Jeb's pulse began to race when he saw that it was Lin Eldredge. He left off stripping his dun and pack mare and strode out to meet her. He caught but ignored Ryerson's disapproving frown. Jeb figured that he was free to do as he liked and that it wasn't any concern of Ryerson's if he wanted Lin Eldredge.

"So it was settled in friendly fashion?" the girl said.

"But not to my liking," Jeb told her. "Faber stole my range, and I don't like that. And I'm not forgetting what he did to me."

"You could make a try at forgetting."

"Looks like you're still worried that something'll happen to Faber."

"Maybe I am and maybe I'm not."

"What else is bothering you, then?"

"I don't want to see anybody shot—perhaps killed—in a crazy feud," Lin said, her voice suddenly edgy with impatience. "Matt was reasonable. I think you could be, too."

"What does a girl know about how a man feels when he's been done dirt?" Jeb asked harshly.

Lin retorted almost furiously, "I do know how men feel. My mother died when I was four, and there wasn't a woman within forty miles of our Texas ranch. I grew up with only Dad to care for me and cowhands for companions. I learned plenty about how men are. They've got a crazy pride that makes them bear grudges, and grudges lead to shootings. I'd hoped Mormon men were different from gun-toting Texans, but it looks as though I was wrong!"

They glared at each other.

SUDDENLY Jeb grinned. "You don't know for sure," he told her. "Maybe Mormon men are different. Maybe when we're settled as neighbors, I can help you find out. You wouldn't mind if I rode over to see you once in a while?"

Lin's angry look faded. She didn't smile, but her eyes seemed to soften. She said softly, "I guess I wouldn't mind—too much."

She knéed her paint pony, neck-reined

it about, and rode off.

Jeb stood there, looking after her, unaware that some of his companions were watching him with amused grins.

When the herd was thrown across a rocky ridge onto a stretch of the barrens that gave some slight promise as a summer range, Cletus Ryerson told Jeb that he would return to Grand City but would leave two of the men there to help him get settled.

The merchant also left behind most of the provisions the band had packed in and promised to send in another supply before winter. The Benson brothers, Luke and Cal, were hired to stay. But Jeb saw, by the way the pair looked when the rest of the band rode off, that he couldn't count on them for long.

The Bensons did help him build a one-room stone hut with a piñon-log roof, however, but when the provisions were moved in, Luke Benson said:

"Jeb, we're pulling out. A man can go crazy in this lonely country. We're sure sorry, but—"

Jeb told them he didn't mind their going but that night, rustling up supper, he felt the weight of a sudden loneliness. He began to think of visiting the Eldredge camp, thirty miles away. He decided to ride that way the next day.

V

INCE a week, on Sundays, Jeb visited the Eldredge headquarters. Sunday seemed the proper day for his visits. He'd ride in during the afternoon, stay for supper, then leave as it grew dark. It was a sixty-mile trip, coming and going, but it didn't seem too far to ride to see Lin, not when she was so obviously glad that he came.

But two things tempered his pleasure in those visits. One was that either Lin or her father always mentioned Matt Faber. Being closer than Jeb, Faber showed up there a couple times a week—or so Jeb gathered. He couldn't help being jealous, for he knew that Faber was courting Lin. The second thing that bothered Jeb was Sam Eldredge's manner. At first, the man was cordial, but on his fourth and fifth visits, Jeb noted that Sam's welcome was sort of cool.

Jeb mentioned it to Lin when he was

saddling up to leave that fifth Sunday. "Maybe your dad doesn't like my coming to see you."

"He's never said so to me," Lin told him and turned grave. "He's worried. He's no longer sure this is good cattle country. We've had no rain since we crossed over into Utah, and the creeks and water holes are drying up. Our cattle are gaunted. If there's a drought, they'll all die."

Jeb was almost convinced that worry did explain Sam Eldredge's coolness toward him. He had noticed that the bunches of longhorns he had seen scattered over the range were skinnier than ever. But the next Sunday Sam saddled a horse and rode out a short distance into the darkening desert with Jeb.

"It's not that I don't like you, son, but I'd rather you didn't come calling on my daughter," Eldredge said soberly.

"What have you got against me?" Jeb demanded.

"It's your being a Mormon," Sam said deliberately. "I've got nothing against Mormons, you understand. I reckon they're mighty fine folks. But they're one kind, and we Texans are another. I'm mighty fond of Lin, son—she's all I got. The thing is, I wouldn't want her thinking of marrying a man who maybe later on would have other wives besides her. That's how it is, son."

When Jeb, who was too jolted to talk, didn't say anything, Sam giggled his horse about and headed back to his ranch.

From then on Jeb didn't keep track of the days and finally he didn't know which were Sundays. Loneliness was like a sickness within him, and the only remedy for it was his riding herd on the cattle.

The drought hit his range, too, and Jeb scattered the stock. He scouted out pasture in the tangled canyons, found small sources of water that would serve to tide his small herd over the dry season.

HE RAN small bunches of the white-faces into a dozen wild canyons. When one source failed, he hazed the critters into a deeper canyon. He was in the saddle from dawn to dark, and his two horses—he was riding the pinto mare, too, now—grew thin from the hard work. Jeb himself grew wolf-lean. But he lost no cattle.

Sometimes he wondered how the Texans' longhorns were faring. He was cer-

tain that the desert was decimating them—Matt Faber's herd as well as Sam Eldredge's. But he couldn't gloat, even over Faber's misfortune. Time was making him forget what he had suffered at Matt Faber's hands.

Jeb still had his supplies stored in the stone hut and carried in his saddlebags only enough food for a few days. It meant a long ride from the broken hills to the rocky flats, and he usually made the trip by night. He was surprised to see a campfire glowing outside the hut on one such trip and he was jolted when he found Lin Eldredge there.

He dismounted and stood across the fire from her, looking down at her with something tightening in his chest until it ached. She smiled up at him, but it was a wavering smile, full of uncertainty.

"I've been here since yesterday afternoon, Jeb," she told him. "I helped myself to some of your grub. I hope you don't mind." When he said nothing, her smile faded. "I came for two reasons," she went on. "One was to find out why you stopped coming to see me."

"Didn't your father tell you?"

"So that's it? He said something?"

Jeb said bitterly, "He has an idea that all Mormons have more than one wife."

"Matt Faber put that into his mind," Lin said hollowly.

"You shouldn't have come here."

"Dad knows. I told him that I was coming."

"What was your other reason for coming?"

Lin gazed dully into the fire and said slowly, "To ask you what we should do. Our cattle are dying. The water is all but gone, and the range is grazed out. Dad's facing ruin and he hasn't even hope now. You know this country. You've taken your cattle somewhere. Can't we do the same, find water and graze somewhere?"

"Maybe you can save what cattle you've got left by driving them into the canyons east of here," he said. "But they'll have to be herded in small bunches and moved every time the water fails. And Texans don't raise cattle that way."

"We'll try anything, Jeb, anything!" Lin said fiercely. "If Dad loses his whole herd, he'll be done for. He's got to save what's left of his herd!"

"Tell him to bring his cattle to the

canyons," Jeb said. "I'll give him what help I can." He rose and added, "We'd better not stay here together. I'll take some grub and ride out."

"No, I'll go," Lin said, rising. "You need rest, Jeb. You're fagged. I can see it in your face."

There was a sudden glowing warmth in Jeb Macklin. He fought down an impulse to circle the fire and take this girl in his arms.

"I'll saddle up for you," he said.

WHEN she was ready to go, Jeb helped her mount her paint pony. Merely touching her arm made every part of him cry out with his need for her, and he stepped back quickly. Lin held her mount in.

"I'd never do anything to hurt my father, Jeb," she said. "I love him too much for that. But that doesn't stop me from feeling as I do about you."

"I know," he told her.

"What are we going to do?" she cried.

He shook his head, helplessness in him. "You know that you'd be the only wife I'd ever need or want," he said dully. "Plenty of Mormons have only one wife. Gentiles have the wrong idea about us."

"If only we could make Dad understand—"

"There's no way of doing that."

"No, I suppose not," Lin said despairingly. "Well, so long, Jeb."

"So long," Jeb muttered.

He watched until the darkness swallowed her, listened until he no longer could hear the drumming of the paint's hoofs. He knew now that Lin cared for him, but somehow that only made him feel worse.

Three days later, Sam, lanky Fred Gable, and Shorty Ames drove the suffering cattle to the canyon country. Old Tobie drove the wagon. Lin was acting as wrangler, handling the remuda of twenty-odd horses.

Riding out to meet them, Jeb Macklin told himself there couldn't be another girl like Lin anywhere.

Sam rode out of the cloying red dust, an uneasy look on his bearded face.

"Jeb, I don't know what to say to you after the way I treated you," he said.

"No need to say anything," Jeb told him. He was quick to understand that the

older man still hadn't changed his mind about letting a Mormon court his daughter. He gestured toward the tortured sandrock cliff walls looming ahead. "You hunt hard enough in those canyons, and you'll find some water."

"You raise cattle in that *malpais*?"

"That's my winter range," Jeb replied. "A man could graze twenty thousand head through those canyons if he scattered them right."

"Well, I've got nothing much to lose."

"What's Faber doing with his herd?"

"He's suffering it out, Texas fashion," Sam said. "His cattle are dying by the dozens every day. That creek he was counting on sank right into the sand, and all he's got left is a few poor water holes. He's let his cows scatter, like on a Texas range, and hundreds of them are lost in the cedar brakes. I told him what you'd told Lin, about getting into the small canyons. Matt said it was crazy."

"He still aims to let his cattle range loose?"

"Unless he has a change of mind."

"The winter'll do that for him," Jeb said. "Well, it's too bad."

Too bad for those helpless cow critters, Jeb meant. He cared not at all that it was hurting Matt Faber. Seeing the terrible condition of the Eldredge cattle, Jeb could guess how badly off Faber's herd was. Sam Eldredge said that he had lost more than a hundred and fifty head, about forty of them on the drive. He was a worried man.

VI

DURING the next few days, when Jeb helped him and his crew to scatter his stock through the tangled maze of canyons, Sam Eldredge brightened.

There was some water, if searched out, and plenty of grama and buffalo grass, and that meant hope. Jeb worked along with Sam and his riders, and in three days they had the Eldredge cattle safe in the broken country. Texas longhorns mingled with Mormon white-faces, but that didn't matter. Sam Eldredge and Jeb Macklin were riding together like men of the same outfit.

In a canyon with timber handy and a small stream of water spilling from a

crevice in a cliff wall, work was begun on shelters to withstand the coming winter. A small cabin was built for Lin. A bunkhouse was started next and roofed over with poles and brush before the first snow flurry. A big lean-to barn was begun after the bunkhouse.

Jeb rode to the stone hut on the upper range, moved his gear and supplies into the new headquarters. A week later, more supplies arrived from Cletus Ryerson's store. They were loaded on two pack mules and were brought by Luke Benson.

A week after Luke had come and gone, the sky turned black. The wind howled steadily day after day. There was some rain, though not sufficient to fill up the desert streams. The wind turned cold.

Early in November, a blizzard struck. It kept up one whole day and night. It was bad in the sheltered canyons. Jeb knew that it must be hell out on the open barrens where Matt Faber had put up his headquarters.

It was a hard winter, even in the sheltered canyons. One snow followed another, and the wind made howling blizzards of them. Jeb and the Eldredge crew spent no idle moments. Firewood had to be cut on the slopes, an enormous supply of it. The cattle had to be watched over, even though the water was no longer a problem.

Sometimes they had to be moved from a badly snowed grass to one less hard hit. Often young animals, when found bogged down in giant drifts, had to be roped and dragged out.

Lin did the cooking for the crew, for now even old Tobie was in the saddle. These Texans had been accustomed to loafing in the winter, to letting their cattle take their chances on winter range, and Jeb could see that they hated this Utah country. But Sam Eldredge had to admit that the cattle would come through, that he could rebuild his herd with the coming calf crop.

There were nights when they didn't get back to headquarters at all and were forced to eat cold grub which they now packed along in their saddlebags.

ON ONE occasion when Sam and his men didn't come in, Jeb was looking after some of his white-faces in a near-by box canyon. He rode back just before

dark and found a strange horse standing before the bunkhouse. The thought, *Faber*, flashed into his mind, for the horse bore the Texas MF brand.

But when Jeb entered the building where Lin was busy cooking supper at the fireplace, he saw that it was the angular-faced rider who had helped tie him on his horse that day in midsummer. He was so startled by the change in the man that he stared without speaking.

"It's me, Macklin—Charlie Bell," the Faber hand said.

He was as skinny and as poorly dressed as a scarecrow. His bony face was matted with a growth of reddish beard, and his nostrils and lips were so cracked by the cold that they had bled. He sat huddled by the fireplace and had an old flour sack wrapped about his neck for a muffler. He wore a torn and threadbare mackinaw, and his levis were crudely patched in half a dozen places. His hands were red and swollen from the cold, proof that he owned no gloves.

Despite the warmth of the fire, Charlie Bell was shivering violently. He thanked Lin with a look when she handed him a tin cup of hot coffee, and gulped it down, hot as it was. The man seemed starved.

Finally he said, "I've been telling Miss Lin, Macklin. I've been through hell. I started out for Grand City but couldn't make it. The snow's two feet deep on the upper range. My horse was playing out, so I set out to find you folks."

"You quit Faber?"

"Couldn't stand it any longer," Charlie said. "It would've been bad enough, even if Matt hadn't gone loco. Three of the boys quit him a week before I did. Some of the others would leave him, too, only they're scared to buck the snow and cold."

"What do you mean, saying that Faber's gone loco?"

"He got crazy mad during the drought, seeing his cattle dying by hundreds. We tried to talk him into moving into the lower country, like you did, but he claimed the drought was just as bad there. So he hung on. There was some rain in the fall, but the grass was burned out, and a man can't keep cattle alive on water alone."

Charlie went on talking in a dead-beat voice. Faber had sent his riders out finally to drive what was left of his herd into the cedar brakes, figuring that they'd

pull through that way, and he could have a brush-popping roundup in the spring. Faber had then set out for Grand City to buy supplies for the winter. He'd taken Charlie and another hand along. First thing in Grand, Faber had gone on a drunk.

"Where would he get whisky in Grand?" Jeb asked, surprised.

"A man opened up a rotgut bar in an empty cabin," Charlie said and explained that fifty miners had come from some diggings on the south side of the San Juan and were wintering in Grand. They'd brought dust with them, and the whisky seller had followed them. He was also a tinnhorn gambler, and miners like to gamble.

"So does Matt Faber," said Charlie Bell, his cold-tortured lips forming a wry smile.

FABER had seen the gold the miners were squandering in Shannon's dead-fall and had got the notion he could get some of it for himself. He started with about three thousand dollars, all the money he possessed, and he might have had a chance in that poker game if he had stayed sober. But he had drunk heavily.

In the end, the money was lost. He got ugly mean, accused a miner of cheating, and there was a fight. Faber had got beat up, being too drunk to get his gun out in a hurry. Broke, Faber had begged Cletus Ryerson to give him some grub on credit. Ryerson would give him only enough to see him and his hands out of the country.

"Faber took that much," Charlie said. "But he wasn't going to pull out of Black Basin. He loaded up what little supplies he got, then drove the wagon over to the bar and traded his gold watch for a barrel of whisky. He shared the grub with the crew, and they stretched it by butchering a cow every so often. But Matt kept the whisky for himself. When winter hit us, he was drunk all the time. But it's worse than that, because he's a crazy man along with being drunk. His cattle are dying out there in those cedar brakes, and Matt knows he's a ruined man."

"But he still means to stay in Black Basin?"

"He'll stay so long as he's got one cow left, Macklin."

"What are you going to do?"

Charlie Bell pleaded, "Let me stay here till the weather opens. I'll work along with the rest, just for chuck and shelter. You run me off, I'll die out there sure. What do you say, Macklin?"

"It's all right with me," Jeb told him. "I don't know about Sam."

"Sam will let you stay, Charlie," Lin said huskily.

There was pain in her eyes. Jeb knew that she was thinking not so much of Charlie Bell now but of those others—Matt Faber and the men still holed up with him.

Charlie Bell didn't shirk. He was a tophand and more than any of the Eldredge crew, he could ride with Jeb. They rode harder and farther through the snow and cold than the others and so did more to keep the cattle on proper graze and alive.

VII

LIN kept track of the days and she had a fine meal for Christmas. That was the one day none of the hands so much as put a saddle on a mount. New Year's Day she had another special meal, but it was no holiday for the men. Another snow had fallen the night before, and they were out most of the day, pulling young stock out of drifts.

It was in mid-January, on another stormy night, that Charlie Bell said, "Jeb, I hear something."

Sam Eldredge was over in the cabin with Lin. Charlie and Fred, Shorty and old Tobie were in the bunkhouse with Jeb. The only light was from the fireplace and a solitary tallow candle. The men looked at each other with sudden uneasiness, for they all had heard it—the sound of riders.

"Matt Faber, sure," Charlie said flatly. "And trouble!"

Jeb pulled on his mackinaw, grabbed up his rifle, went out. The wind shoved at him, kept on shoving. There were snow flurries, swirling murky-white clouds. A line of riders—nine of them, with two pack animals—loomed out of the darkness. Crusted snow crunched noisily under shod hoofs. Somebody grabbed Jeb from behind, pulled him down behind the high

stack of firewood near the bunkhouse door. It was Charlie Bell. He crouched beside Jeb and he, too, was gripping a rifle.

"I've told the boys to cover us from the door and window," Charlie muttered. "You watch yourself, partner, because Matt Faber hates you much. I've heard him curse you plenty when he was liquored up. Blames you for his losing out with the girl."

"What do you figure he's up to?"

"I don't know," said Charlie Bell. "But I'm telling you, he's a crazy man."

Faber was acting like a crazy man.

"Eldredge, show yourself!" he bawled. He waited no time at all before starting an unholy cursing, then drew his gun and fired a shot into the air. "Eldredge, you skunk!"

The cabin door opened, and the slight figure of Sam Eldredge was limned by the lantern light inside. As Sam stepped forward, Lin came to the doorway, wrapping a shawl about herself. Jeb felt like groaning. He had an impulse to shout to her to get back inside and bar the door. Like Charlie Bell, Jeb knew this was trouble—gun trouble.

"What do you want, Matt?" Sam asked. "What brings you here?"

Faber cursed him. "Asking something like that!" he raged. "Sitting by a fire behind good walls, eating fat while I'm freezing and starving! Taking up with a Mormon and turning against your own kind to save your cattle! You and that girl of yours!"

"I didn't turn against you, Matt," Sam said mildly. "But a man has got to look out for himself."

"You're holed up with that sneaking Mormon!"

"I threw in with Macklin to save myself from ruin, Matt."

"Yeah, and when I asked you to go partners with me, back in Texas, you turned me down," Faber yelled. "I wasn't good enough for you or your daughter. But that Mormon son is, it looks like."

Jeb would have left cover, but Charlie grabbed his arm and held him. There was fear in Charlie Bell. Perhaps it was a reasonable fear, for he knew Matt Faber well, knew the nature of the man. Faber was cursing wildly, waving his sixgun. Drunk? Crazy? Jeb guessed it was both.

But one thing was clear: disaster had made Matt Faber hate. That was his craziness.

HE HATED Sam Eldredge because the easy-going little man had saved himself from ruin. He hated Lin Eldredge because she had urged her father to take his cattle into the broken country. He hated Jeb Macklin with the greatest intensity of all because Lin had fallen in love with him. All that came out in Faber's wild raving.

"You want to know what I want," Faber said, calming a little but with his voice still sharp with rage. "I'm telling you, Mormon-lover! I'm taking over here. Me and my men have got to have shelter and grub, and you're sharing with us. I'm not asking for what I want. From now on, I'm taking what's coming to me and not stopping for any man!"

"We've got no room for all your crew, Matt," Sam Eldredge said uneasily. "As for food, we've only got enough to see us through the winter. We wouldn't have that if it wasn't for Jeb Macklin."

Faber cursed Jeb Macklin, gestured with his sixgun. "Boys, do like I told you," he ordered. "Disarm every man you find. And if anybody feels proddy, shoot him down!"

Lin Eldredge said suddenly, "Matt, don't do it that way. Be reasonable, and we'll find a way to help you. If we can't make our food supply last by sharing it, we'll live off beef."

Faber's temper flared again. "That's all I hear from you," he shouted at her. "Talk about being reasonable!" His hatred for Lin had nothing to do with his wanting her, and he added savagely, "That's all changed, too. With me boss of this camp, you're going to look at things a lot different!" He swung toward his men. "Get going," he ordered. "And find that Mormon. I'll settle with him and finish what I started the first time he bucked me!"

The shivering, half-starved Texans drew their guns, turned their gaunted mounts toward the bunkhouse. A wind-whipped snow flurry obscured them for a moment. Jeb stepped from behind the woodpile, levering a cartridge into the rifle's chamber.

"Hold it, you!" he shouted. "We've got

you covered!"

"That's right, buckos!" Charlie Bell yelled, siding Jeb. "A lot of you are going to be gunned down!"

The eight riders halted in a bunch, confusion hitting them. Matt Faber spurred his horse forward, swearing.

"Drop your guns," Jeb called out. "We'll do what we can for you, but you'll have to be disarmed. Don't be crazy enough to die for Matt Faber!"

"Sure, that Mormon'll take your guns and then drive you out," Faber told them. "Jump him, you fools! It's your only chance!"

His sixgun roared.

The Texans were goaded into it by the suffering they had endured, by the fear of what lay ahead if they couldn't have the camp as a haven, and by Matt Faber's wildness. Their guns blazed, and Jeb escaped their fire only because Charlie Bell grabbed him and shoved him violently behind the stacked firewood.

The three men within the bunkhouse opened fire. Texan horses began to pitch, one screaming as it was hit and collapsed. Texan men cried out, swore, howled in pain. Charlie Bell's rifle cracked, and Jeb shoved his weapon across the top of the cordwood barricade and fired.

Across the way, Sam Eldredge shoved Lin back into the cabin and reappeared with a gun in his hand. He started running toward the bunkhouse but went down in a limp heap when a Faber man targeted him.

Jeb lined his sights on Matt Faber but just as he fired, another rider galloped by, took the slug, and toppled over his horse's rump. Matt Faber bellowed orders, and suddenly his men swung around and followed him to Lin's cabin. They left their horses, took cover about the cabin. Jeb shouted to Charlie and the men within the bunkhouse to hold their fire.

The racketing gunshots suddenly let up. Faber yelled tauntingly, "Keep shooting, you Mormon rat, and you're sure to kill the girl. Go on, keep shooting!"

JEB saw that Faber had dealt himself the winning hand. The Texan had lost three men but he had got the other five behind the best of cover. He knew that Jeb and the others wouldn't risk endan-

gering Lin Eldredge by keeping up their deadly fire.

A chance bullet through the gunny-sack-covered window or through the flimsy door of chuckwagon boards might find the girl. In such frenzied gunfire there were bound to be wild shots. Faber let out a roar of unholy laughter.

"We've got you, Mormon!" he shouted. "Now you and your crowd throw down your guns and clear out. We'll give you time to saddle up. Come on, now, throw out your guns!"

"Don't trust him," Charlie Bell said. "He'll gun us down, sure."

"Keep them busy," Jeb told him. "But don't shoot too near the cabin door or window. I'm going to try to get behind them."

Charlie nodded grimly and started shooting, and Jeb bolted toward the corner of the bunkhouse. Gunshots crashed, slugs shrieked by him. He made it safely, kept on running with the building shielding him. He circled the lean-to barn, plodded through drifted snow, hit the ice-covered stream. Reaching the far bank, he ran along it and had some scrub cottonwoods for cover. Beyond, was an open space, and Faber and his men tried to target him as he plunged across it.

He heard again the vicious whine of too-close slugs, and one tore through the slack of his mackinaw. He dived for some piled-up rocks, landed flat on his stomach, and crawled on until he was behind a boulder. He lay there, making himself small, and brought the rifle to his shoulder.

The rocks and the narrow stream were before him, and beyond, lay an open stretch to the cabin. He saw Matt Faber lift a rifle and begin shooting wildly into the rocks. He fired but missed. Faber ducked back around the side of the cabin.

Over by the bunkhouse, Charlie Bell kept up a methodical fire. Jeb fired twice more, probing the shadows, and a man uttered a cry of agony. Another Faber man came lurching away from the cabin and fell sprawling, downed by one of Charlie's shots.

A man yelled in despair, "Matt, they'll kill us all!"

Faber shouted, "Rush that Mormon! Get him, and we've got what we want! Come on, you cowards!"

Four men started out, Matt Faber and three who were left of the crew. Faber kept firing the rifle as he ran, but the others suddenly turned and ran toward their horses. They swung to their saddles, turned away in wild flight. Faber became aware of their desertion only when he reached the ice-laced stream.

He cried out against it, a cry from deep in his tortured soul. Then he threw down his rifle, drew his sixgun.

He bellowed, "You, Macklin!" and cursed him and came on.

Jeb rose, fired point-blank at him. Faber stopped, as though having collided with an invisible barrier. Then he stumbled forward two steps, fired again, and fell sprawling into the icy water.

He picked himself up, gained the snow-covered bank. He'd lost his gun, he was dying on his feet, yet he came on, his hatred driving him. He came face to face with Jeb Macklin, and Jeb lacked the will to shoot again. Then Faber's knees buckled, he cried out once more in despair, and collapsed.

The wind howled again, now that the guns were silent.

A voice called, "Jeb—Jeb, where are you?" It was Lin's voice.

SAM ELDREDGE was unconscious, not dead. They carried him into the bunkhouse, and old Tobie, who was a jack-of-all-trades, took charge of him. It was an ugly wound, but Tobie said, after examining it, "He's in for a bad time of it, but I'll pull him through."

He sent Lin, who was no longer frightened but worried, to her cabin for cloth for bandages. He ordered Fred Gable to heat a lot of water and Shorty Ames to build up the fire. He handed Charlie Bell a knife and told him to sharpen it until it had a razor edge. He ordered Jeb to find the bottle of carbolic among the supplies. Sam Eldredge regained consciousness while preparations for the operation were being made. He asked for Jeb.

Jeb hurried to the side of the bunk and said, "Take it easy, Sam. You'll be all right. Tobie will pull you through."

He saw that the little man didn't believe that. Same thought he was dying. His face was stiff with pain.

"Jeb, my daughter will be alone if I die," he said weakly. "She loves you, and you—be good to her, son."

"You're giving us your consent, Sam?"

"Yes. You're worthy of her."

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The BORDER PATROL

A Novel by **WILLIAM HOPSON**

I

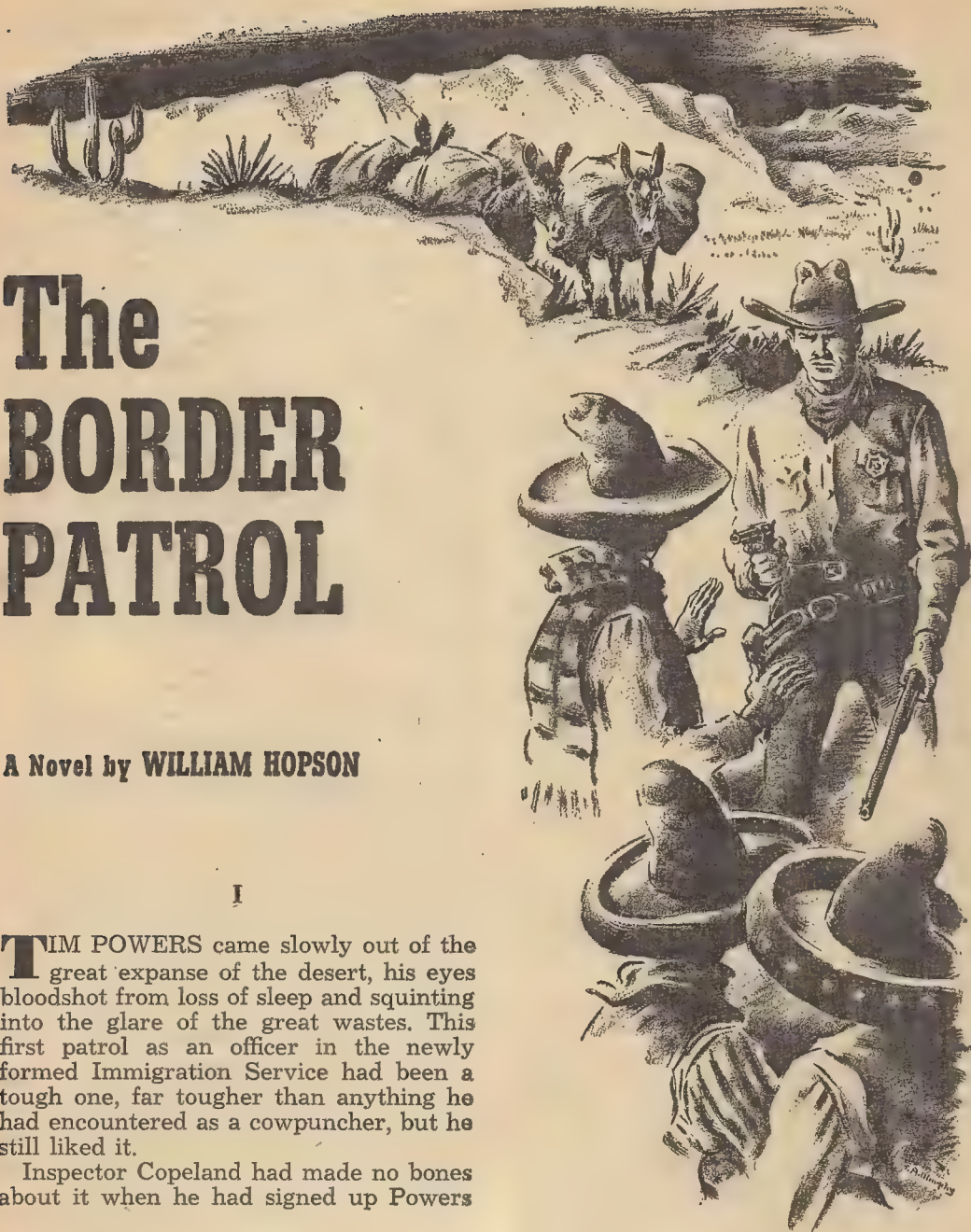
TIM POWERS came slowly out of the great expanse of the desert, his eyes bloodshot from loss of sleep and squinting into the glare of the great wastes. This first patrol as an officer in the newly formed Immigration Service had been a tough one, far tougher than anything he had encountered as a cowpuncher, but he still liked it.

Inspector Copeland had made no bones about it when he had signed up Powers

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Popular Western

"What are your names?" Jim
asked in Spanish. "Talk up"

There were three hundred miles to ride — every mile dangerous!



The Border Smugglers Were a Law Unto Themselves

and his friend Verne Thompson. Copeland had given up a deputy United States marshal's job in Phoenix to take over, and his orders had been direct.

"You have three hundred miles of the Border to patrol on horseback," he had been told. "Get the twenty best men you can lay hands on and stop these killings and this smuggling."

Until recently Jeff Milton, the only man in the service, had ridden the Mexican Border alone all the way from El Paso to San Diego. Once Jeff had gone after three men, then had sent back a laconic telegram for them to send two coffins and one doctor.

Copeland was that kind of man. He had not recruited his twenty new officers from the cities and their policemen, but had gone after—and got men of a different stripe. Cowpunchers who knew the desert like Apaches; men who could go for days on jerky and pinole, and find forage for a horse where there was little forage; men who didn't talk much but who could shoot straight and be depended upon to follow orders. Tim Powers had been one; Verne Thompson another.

There were eighteen more just like them, strung up and down the Line one hundred and fifty miles on each side of Nogchecita, Sonora.

Powers worked his way on westward that hot afternoon, heading toward a small water hole in an arroyo ahead. He wanted to water the sweaty roan, rest him a bit, and refill his canteen.

The lip of the arroyo showed up ahead and Powers topped it, dropped down a cutbank, and walked the roan into grass growing in a brief area around where the water trickled down. He swung down, loosened the cinch, shook the saddle free to give air circulation and prevent saddle gall, and let the animal sink its muzzle into the tiny pool of water formed from the trickle. After that, he took the bit from its mouth, slipped the headstall back over the sweaty ears, and let the horse begin to crop.

He rested the animal for an hour. It was five miles on west to the newly built immigration station at Nogchecita, and the

afternoon was still early. The sun boiled down and the shade of the greasewood felt good. Presently Powers finished a last cigarette, mounted, and rode on across the wide bed of Arroyo Seco—Dry Creek.

One hundred yards from the spring he came across the trail. Powers bent from the saddle and studied the tracks. Burros or small mules—and the hoofprints sank deep into the sand. They were heavily laden.

"Tequila or mescal," Powers grunted. "And those tracks are fresh. About two hours old."

He reined the roan around and headed due north, setting a pace that the rested and refreshed animal could hold with ease. He followed the tracks for four miles up the arroyo bed. Presently they left it and swung up over the rim, still heading due north toward green-covered mountains that shimmered far away through the dancing heat waves.

HE HAD lipped the rim when the first shot slammed harmlessly over his head. Powers spun the roan hard, buck-jumping him down from view. He jumped down and jerked his .30-30 repeater carbine from the saddle boot.

He ran fifty yards westward, sprinting through the sand in his high-heeled boots and not looking much like an immigration officer, except for the badge on his shirt front. He might have been one of a thousand cowpunchers working the desert ranges throughout Arizona. He crawled up again, and then he saw them two hundred yards away.

Four heavily laden pack mules.

Three of the men with the mules were Mexicans on foot. This he already had known from the tracks. But there was a man on horseback, an American. A pretty cagey gent, Powers thought, for his horse's tracks had not been in the arroyo. He had ridden wide, but had apparently come in for consultation about the time the immigration officer had spotted them. It was he who had fired the shot.

The Mexicans were whipping their mules and trotting along beside them while the American smuggler with the

Until Tim Powers Took Matters Into His Own Hands

rifle had jumped down and was kneeling on one knee, rifle ready.

This was a job where a man had to make quick decisions. Powers hated to do it but he killed the man with the first shot.

The belt around his waist contained half .30-30s for his rifle and half .45s for his six-shooter. He slid on one side to get at the cartridges, slipped two fresh ones into the magazine, and lifted his head again, ducking as sand puffed into his face. He spat, wiped his lips with a sleeve. That had been close. Most Mexicans were supposed to be poor shots, but these were not.

He waited until their weapons were empty, his own loaded rifle up and ready.

"*Alto!*" he yelled at them then. "*Official federale!*"

twenties, looked nervously at the other two, then back to Powers.

"We do not dare talk, señor," he said. "We have sworn an oath by Our Lady of Guadalupe not to talk on pain of death. We can not break that sacred oath to Our Lady."

"It will not be breaking the oath if you tell me if you are working for somebody else. Remember your oath. You must not lie."

Again the younger man looked at the others. Finally he nodded.

"We are working for somebody else. That is all we can tell you."

"Where were you going?"

A shrug. Blank-eyed stares.

Powers, pocketknife in hand, cut the pack ropes and ripped back the canvas. Square cartons met his gaze. Each con-



Two of them threw down their empty guns and raised their hands. The third leaped sideways and ran fifty yards with dust spurting up around him. Then he, too, surrendered as a rifle shell whined over his head.

Powers went forward, Winchester half-way to his shoulder. They stood glowering and frightened, watching his approach. He came up to them, substituted Colt for repeater, and looked them over.

"What are your names?" he rapped out in Spanish. "Talk up!"

Three shrugs and frightened scowls. They stared at him, blank-eyed.

"Who was that Americano?" he demanded. "It will be better if you talk."

Again blank-eyed stares.

"Very well," he said. "You will talk in the jail in Tucson. But if you tell me now, your punishment for smuggling will be less."

One of them, a young Mexican in his

tained twenty-four bottles of mescal.

He straightened and beckoned to the three captives, ordering them to pull out three of the boxes. Then they went to work under his orders. When they finished, the hot desert air reeked with the raw odor of the fiery liquor. He ordered them to work again, while he turned the mules loose—they would find their way home—and fifteen minutes later the Mexicans stood submissively, each with an improvised back pack carrying a carton of liquor for evidence. They trudged over three hundred yards and pulled up while the officer rolled the dead American over with his foot. The features were dark, hard even in the laxness of death, vicious-looking.

Powers' lips tightened, but he said nothing. He sent the Mexicans on into the arroyo, got his horse, swung up, and the little group began a return trip along the sandy bed.

IT TOOK them nearly two hours to make the return trip to the spring. There Powers let them drink and rest for fifteen minutes. Not that they needed much rest. These men were as hard as Apaches. They could walk thirty miles in a day with a full pack load and consider it nothing.

Presently, after they had rested, they threw away their corn-husk cigarettes, adjusted the makeshift packs on their backs, and set off once more.

Powers followed behind them on his horse, repeater across the saddle. He was not worried about their trying for a break. They knew they wouldn't get fifty yards before they fell.

They worked on southward for another two miles, and it was then that Tim Powers saw the horse.

It was wandering aimlessly, reins dragging, and when Powers rode closer, he saw blood on the saddle. He also saw the initials "VT" stamped on the saddle.

He rode around in front of the peons, and they saw in his bloodshot eyes a new, blazing rage that sent fear into their hearts. They had no way of knowing that only that badge on his shirt front might have prevented a cold, methodical extermination of three smugglers right there in the arroyo.

"Where is he?" he shot down at them in Spanish. "Quick!"

The youngest man hastily pointed. "Over there—about a half mile."

Powers drove them forward, almost at a trot. There was the possibility that Verne might still be alive. He saw the huddled figure and sent his horse forward at a gallop, hitting the ground and bending down.

"Verne!" he called sharply. "Verne!"

He might have saved his time. Verne Thompson, the man who had been signed up when Powers had signed, was stone dead. A red splotch had soaked his shirt front.

The Mexicans were plodding stoically toward the body, and Powers remounted, loped out, and caught the reins of Thompson's horse.

It was on the way back that he saw the new tracks. A horse's tracks. And the horse had gone out of there fast—south, toward the sanctuary of the Line.

They came up, those three peons and stood by, looking at Powers uncertainly.

He was down on the ground again, standing by the dead officer's body.

"Who did it?" he demanded.

More shrugs.

"Mexican or American?" he shot back.

The youngest Mexican answered. "An American, señor."

"The one who went south into Sonora—across the Line?"

All three men nodded this time.

Powers went over to Verne Thompson's horse and took down the lariat. Verne might have become an immigration officer, but a man doesn't change a habit of years easily, and Verne had been too good a cowpuncher not to feel lost without a rope on his saddle.

Under Powers' directions the three smugglers hoisted the dead officer face down across the saddle and lashed his body securely with the rope. Then the party set off south and west, heading toward the dot in the distance that was Nochecita.

Apparently the smugglers didn't think much of the new officers who had appeared on the scene only a few days before. They had crossed the Line in broad daylight and less than five miles east of the new station where an inspector sat in his office.

The captives trudged on. Behind them, at a walk, came a rider who sat erect in the saddle with a grim look on his unshaved face and another man whose head bobbed laxly as he lay face down, bound by the rope that held his bullet-shattered body.

II

THE newly built station lay beside the broad dirt road that ran southward into the little Mexican town just across the Line. The building was of adobe, so new that the fragrant odor of new earth and mud mortar was still discernible. It lay fifty yards north of the boundary, a squat building of two rooms, with a big shady arch built over the road to allow officers and those being inspected to be comfortable in the shade.

One of the rooms was supposed to be Inspector Copeland's office—after he got more men. But the Immigration Service was so short-handed now that Copeland, working up to eighteen hours a day, was

inspecting traffic himself. Johnny Kelso, who roomed with Powers, had the fourteen-hour night shift from four in the afternoon until six in the morning. Kelso happened to have been gifted with a better than average education, and Copeland had, therefore, put him on duty at the station.

It was necessary to keep the Line open twenty-four hours a day, for this was the time of year when Sonora cattlemen, exporting their cattle across the Line into the United States, often preferred to drive at night to avoid the terrible heat of the desert. There was a wide gate, fifty yards east of the building, where Johnny Kelso, beside a light mounted on a pole, could tally the imported stock as they came through, and collect duty on them.

Kelso strolled over about four o'clock, after an early supper which Mrs. Elkins, his landlady, had fixed for him. Mrs. Elkins took in a few roomers, for Nohecita, Arizona, was a small place, consisting of just four houses and one little store.

Kelso came in and put his lunch on a table in the corner. Copeland sat at his desk, a makeshift affair. They had furnished the office with whatever had been available at the moment. The telephone on the desk connected with both an operator at Parslee, twenty miles north, and with the small station over on the Mexican side.

"Hello, Cope." Kelso grinned. He was twenty-four, red-haired, and intelligent. "Any word from any of the boys today?"

"Mills phoned in from over in Santerville. He's bringing in two burros and one Mexican." Copeland sighed. He was in his late fifties, brown as saddle leather, and with a shock of white hair. "They're crawling over this Border like ants. . . . You ever work any sheep, Johnny?"

"That's a fine question to ask a cowpuncher." Johnny Kelso's grin widened. "Any self-respecting cowpuncher, anyhow."

"Well, I have. Long time ago. Tried to drive some lambs one day. They went along with their mummies until they began to play out, then they started back to where they were born. We fought them with dogs, tin cans strung on wire, hooks, and about everything in the book. But they went back, and we had to drive the whole band back to where we started,

rest 'em overnight, then try again. Something about this smuggling and these smugglers reminds me of that. No matter what you do, they seem to keep right on coming."

"Give us time to get under way," Kelso said. "Smugglers ain't sheep. They got some sense. A sheep's not cunning. We'll get 'em in time. I don't suppose we'll ever be able to stop it all, but I'll bet you a plugged peso, boss, that in six months we'll cut this flood of liquor and drugs to a trickle."

"It's tough," grunted the inspector. "They're clever. Two months ago, up by El Paso, they caught an American cowpuncher swimming his horse back across the Rio, pursued by Mexican bandits. So he said. But he had one belt and a bandolier of forty-five-seventy cartridges on him. I'd sure hated to have to defend myself with one of those shells. Drugs just don't burn like black powder."

"Seems to me Tim Powers ought to be blowing in any time now," Kelso remarked, settling himself in a chair.

A moment later, he got up, went outside, looked at the passport a Mexican handed him, nodded toward the store two hundred yards away, then came back in and resumed his chair.

"No word from Tim or Verne?" he asked.

Copeland shook his head. "No word."

They were still sitting there talking when Powers came out of the desert waste, grimy, sweaty, and with a three-day stubble of beard on his gaunt face. He swung down, taking handcuffs from his saddlebags.

He linked his three prisoners together with the two pairs. The Line was close, and they just might try for a break, and he didn't want to kill a Mexican citizen before the eyes of the two officials lounging in the shade of their own little station fifty yards away. He ordered the Mexicans on around the corner.

Copeland's eyes widened, and Johnny Kelso's jaw sagged as the four men entered.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Kelso breathed softly.

POWERS nodded to the three men to stand still, slipped their back loads to the floor, and ordered them to stand in a

corner. He went to the burlap-covered water keg and drained a tin cup full, drinking gustily. Copeland had got up. He said nothing for a time.

"Good work, Tim," he finally said. "Now we're getting some place. Mills got another today with two burros. Maybe we'll be able to convince Washington yet. The evidence, too. Good!" Suddenly his eyes narrowed. "That all they had?"

Tim Powers sat down, shaking his head. He took a pack of tailormade cigarettes from his pocket.

"No," he said. "There was an American with 'em with a rifle, guarding the rear. He's dead."

"Hmmm, I see. You're pretty well acquainted around this country. Ever see him before?"

Powers nodded. "He was cleaning out water holes for Fogarty when I was working up that way last year. Fellow named Red something or other. I heard later he up and quit over some kind of a quarrel with Fogarty."

"I see." Copeland nodded again. "Didn't run across Thompson, did you? I sent him on night patrol east of here for twenty miles late yesterday afternoon. He should have been back by noon."

"He's outside," Tim Powers answered slowly. "They got him about noon today, a few miles east of here."

It got quiet in the little room. Copeland rose and put his hands behind his back and looked out the south window into the desert waste. It stretched into Sonora, cut by a thin green line that meant a trickle of water furnishing life to the sands as it wound its way toward the Mexican Gulf.

Johnny Kelso was rigid. The three prisoners stood uncomfortably, their hats off. One of them shuffled his sandaled feet a bit noisily, his oversized, dirty toes showing through the toe straps.

Copeland turned and looked at his two men.

"The first to go," he said. "We've been on the job less than a week, and Thompson is gone. How did it happen?"

"In the back with a rifle, about four miles north of the Line. Hadn't been dead long. I cut their trail just above where he was killed and went north. On the way back with these prisoners I found his hoss and then him."

"Who did it? Did these fellows talk?"

"They've taken a religious oath not to tell who they're working for. But they did say it was another American who made tracks for the Border fast, after he ambushed Thomp. Verne was one of the best, Cope. We've worked cattle off and on together for around four years. We were mighty good friends."

"Yes, I know." Something like a tired sigh went out of the inspector's body.

He was tired. Sixteen to eighteen hours a day, trying to hold things down until Congress could appropriate more money for a bigger and better organized force. His was the job of pioneering a new branch of the government, of breaking ground for a great organization of the future, and right now it was a tough job.

"Let's go outside," he said.

They got up, and Powers motioned for the prisoners to come along. As they all stepped outside under the crudely built arch, they saw a car coming. It was one of the huge, long-bodied, seven-passenger touring models so popular in the early days of automobile manufacture. They paused and waited to inspect it.

The Mexican driver—young and arrogant—pulled up and showed white teeth in a grin. The man beside him nodded, boredly. He was in his early forties, dressed in a light suit and flat-brimmed white hat, and the life of a wealthy ranchman still hadn't taken the hardness out of his body.

His eyes bored out from beneath the hat, piercing and black, and there was about him a certain magnetic power that commanded respect. It was in every inch of his frame. Some people said that John Fogarty had Mexican blood in his veins.

"Any baggage?" Copeland asked, looking into the car.

"Now, Inspector," Fogarty said chidingly, "you know me better than that. For twenty years I've crossed this Line, without inspection, to look after my ranch and other properties I inherited from my father. Now that we've got a new inspection station, you ask a question like that."

THERE was arrogance and a faint touch of sarcasm in the words. It was plain the ranchman was more amused than angered at being stopped.

Copeland ignored the remark and

looked at the driver. "American citizen?" he asked in English.

"Of course." The Mexican grinned. "I am Mr. Fogarty's driver."

"Any proof of it?"

"My perfect English."

"Juan was practically raised on my ranch north of here," Fogarty cut in. "His father worked for mine."

Copeland grimly let that one go by, too, and went around to the tonneau while Fogarty and his Mexican driver let their eyes play over the prisoners. Then Fogarty seemed to see Powers for the first time, badge on his shirt front.

"Well, look who's here!" he exclaimed. "Powers himself. Ah, look at the badge, Juan. So you're an immigration officer now instead of a cowpuncher. Probably better money than I could pay you on the ranch. No hard feelings, I hope, because I had to fire you last winter?"

"I hear," Powers said quietly, "that you fired that feller Red who was cleaning out water holes."

The cattleman nodded. "That's right. He wouldn't work, so I fired him. He left the ranch, blustering about squaring up."

"I don't think you'll have any worries about that," was the reply.

Fogarty twisted his lips in contempt. "I worry about such a trifle. Not any more than when Adams made the same threats after I fired the two of you for fighting."

Copeland came back. "Any firearms?" he asked curtly.

"Not even a pocketknife. What do you think I'm doing—running guns over to some of these little bands of *revoltosos*?"

"Where is Adams these days?" Powers said.

Fogarty shrugged. "Haven't seen him in months. Probably working on another ranch. . . . All right, Inspector? I've got to get down to the ranch and back again tonight."

"All right." Copeland nodded curtly.

The Mexican chauffeur shifted gears, and the car roared on through in low gear. It crossed the Line fifty yards away, got a wave on through from the two lolling Mexican officers, and went on into the single street of Nohecita, Sonora.

"It irks them," Copeland said shortly, leading off around the corner. "It irks me, too, the way some of these big property men with holdings down here don't like

to be inspected. Well," he finished grimly, "they'll just have to get used to it."

Powers and Johnny Kelso unroped Verne Thompson's lax body and gently lowered it to the ground. Copeland bent and examined the dead man. After thirty years as a lawman he was no stranger to such things, but it was obvious that the loss of one of his new men had affected him deeply.

"He was hit from pretty close range," he said, straightening.

"Ambush," Tim Powers nodded. "Like they tried to get me. The way I figure it, one man rode wide on each side of the pack train and kept a sharp lookout. That way, Verne rode right into a two-way ambush, possibly cross fire, though he was hit just once. That one was dead center. He probably never knew what happened."

Copeland wiped sweat from his forehead with a sleeve. His eyes looked tired.

"I suppose so, and there's nothing we can do about it. I've strict orders on that from higher up. We'll just have to hope these boys will talk, then catch the man who did it on this side of the Line."

"I suppose so." Johnny Kelso sighed.

"Well, you better go over and get some rest, Tim," Copeland said. "You look played out. We'll take care of Verne. I'll call Tucson and get some officers down here to transport the prisoners north and file charges against them before the U. S. commissioner. You'll probably have to go up and submit your evidence. As soon as one of the other boys comes in, we'll send out after the other American you left lying in the desert."

They went back inside. Powers took off his gunbelt and laid it on the table beside Kelso's lunch.

"I'm going over across the Line and eat," he said. "I'll be back in a little while."

HE CROSSED over, nodding to the two Mexicans on duty. There was one good restaurant in town. As he came up, he noticed that Fogarty's car was parked in front of it. The young officer went into the coolness of the interior, sauntered over to the bar to have a beer, and order his supper from Mrs. Herrera, the fat, smiling Mexican proprietress.

Then he saw Fogarty sitting at a table and with him the girl. She was blond, she

was American, and she was about the prettiest thing Tim Powers had ever seen.

Fogarty managed a lazy smile in Powers' direction and waved a hand for him to come over and join them. Powers picked up the small glass of cool Mexican beer and went over.

"This is Tim Powers, Helen," Fogarty said with a careless wave of a hand. "Used to work for me until I fired him. Tim, Helen Saunders, my secretary."

Powers bowed to her and pulled up a chair. He held no resentment toward the man. It wasn't good to have cowpunchers fighting on a ranch. Fire one or even both. Fogarty had fired him, and Verne Thompson had quit.

"How do you do," Helen Saunders said, extending a friendly hand.

"So you're Mr. Fogarty's secretary?" he said and added wryly, "Don't get into any fights with anybody or he'll fire you."

"Not her," Fogarty said, half banteringly and half seriously. "She's too efficient, taking care of the books on my holdings down here. . . . So you got three of the smugglers already, eh? Good work."

"You know most of the Mexicans down this way," Tim Powers said. "Ever see them prisoners before? I saw you looking at 'em, and they was looking at you. Thought mebbe they might have been working for you."

That one didn't set well with the cattleman. His black eyes narrowed and then grew hard as he unconsciously leaned forward a bit.

"There wouldn't be any special meaning back of that, would there?" he asked sharply.

"You know every Mexican in this section of the country, and whoever they're working for has made 'em swear not to talk. I thought they might be known to you. I want their names."

"I never saw them before," half snapped the cattleman. He turned to the girl. "Tim's just holding a grudge against me, Helen, because I discharged him for fighting with another of my riders, a man named Red Selzer."

"What happened to Red?" she inquired.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him in months."

"I have," Powers said slowly. "He's laying out on the desert about four or five

miles from here. Copeland is sending a man out after him tonight."

Powers saw the man give a slight start that came too fast to be suppressed. He stared at the officer.

"Dead?" he demanded sharply.

Powers nodded. "The one who killed Verne got away. He's across the Border."

Fogarty was visibly shaken. "I always liked Verne," he said. "He was a good boy. And his killer is across the Line and you can't go after him because it's against regulations? Too bad. I'll keep an eye open for any strange Americans and let you know."

III

MRS. HERRERA brought food, and they ate. Powers kept wondering why a girl like Helen Saunders was working for such a man as Fogarty. He was notorious as a rake, and his big ranch eight miles north of the Line was the scene of many a wild party with hard-drinking men and women guests week-ending in the house. Many nights Powers, with the other men in the bunkhouse, had heard the blare of the phonograph, the shouts, the shrill laughter of women, going on until the early morning hours.

He bent over his plate, and Helen said, "We'll be bringing some cattle north across the Line in a night or so."

"About a hundred head," Fogarty added, using his napkin. "I've been fattening them down on the grass along the creek belt. Good prime stuff, ready for market."

Powers had finished with his meal. He looked over at Fogarty. "Better have your boys make a pretty good check of their ears before you start."

The cattleman frowned. "Ticks? You know I always dip before I export."

"I wasn't talking about ticks," Powers said, as they pushed back their chairs and rose. "Last week, about three hundred miles east of here, a respected cattleman drove about fifty head across. One of the officers happened to see a glint of metal in an ear. They roped and hogtied the steer. Small aluminum containers clipped inside each ear. Heroin. Smugglers had slipped in during the night and loaded them, letting the other man take the risk. It wasn't the cattleman's fault, but he's having a pretty hard time making the

U. S. commissioner believe it."

There shouldn't have been any reason for John Fogarty to take offense, but cold anger blazed from his eyes.

"Powers," he said, "I know you don't like me and of course I know why. You're one of the kind who'll use a badge to settle a grudge. Well, I can handle my end of it. If I catch you sneaking around on any of my range, I'll have you shot on sight. I want that clearly understood. Come on, Helen."

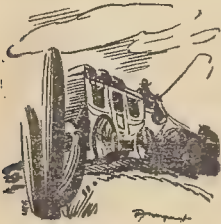
She held out a hand, and the touch of it sent electricity through Powers' body.

—the kind your employer gives. Too busy, anyhow."

He paid for his meal, went outside and toward the Line. Behind him, the Fogarty motor roared into life, and the car set off toward the green belt. Powers strode on toward the station. It was almost sundown now, the time of day when the desert begins to cool.

He saw movement, then Mills came out of the wastes, driving two loaded burros while, beside them, trudged a handcuffed Mexican prisoner. Mills, a lean, taciturn man, older than most of

THE WEST'S MOST UNUSUAL BANDIT



WELLS FARGO headquarters buzzed with excitement. Never had they encountered a similar situation. The head of the company re-read the wire to an amazed telegraph official just to be sure it wasn't a prank.

"September 8, 1889. I have stolen your gold shipment of \$50,000. I await your arresting officers. John Dale Hammond, Caddo, Indian Territory."

When he was assured of the genuineness of the telegram, the freight company official directed territorial lawmen to arrest the bandit. After he was safely in jail, Hammond was questioned about the crime. "Sure I took the gold," he admitted. "Where is it? None of your damn business."

Hammond further boasted that he intended to serve his 20-year sentence and afterwards dig up his stolen loot and live in luxury. "I'll be earning \$2,500 a year in prison," he joked as the cell door closed behind him.

Efforts to force the prisoner to reveal the hidden money were fruitless. Wells Fargo searched the Caddo area for years. Finally they gave up.

Eighteen years after the robbery, the Missouri and Pacific Railway was being constructed along the old Wells Fargo trail. At Caddo, giant steam shovels were cutting away a hill just behind the old freight station.

One of the steam shovels strained at what the operator believed to be a huge boulder. Once on the surface, it proved to be an old safe.

The name, Wells Fargo, was still visible. Railroad officials wired the company. A Wells Fargo officer arrived a few days later and identified the safe. It was the one which had contained the stolen gold.

He knelt down and twisted the rusty dials. Slowly the eroded tumblers fell into place. The door swung open and inside was the entire shipment. Hammond had not removed one cent. Two years later, in 1909, Hammond was released from prison, firmly convinced that crime doesn't pay.

—Robert Franklin Ames

He had never been much of a hand with women and he had never seen anybody as pretty as this girl with the honey-colored hair. And she worked for Fogarty!

"I'm sorry you two men feel this way," she said to Powers. "There are some people coming out from Tucson tomorrow night. I was about to suggest that you drive up for the party."

"Thanks. But I'm not much on parties

the others, pulled up and swung down. Copeland came out of the station.

"Nice work, Mills. Tim got three more. We're getting results, but we lost Verne Thompson. Ambush. What's this fellow's name?"

"He won't talk," Mills said. "Some kind of a religious oath he had to take when they put him to work."

"I see."

"This is organized stuff," Powers said quietly. "This is not hit-and-miss smuggling. Men like these haven't got the contacts. There's big stuff back of it, and we won't find out till we go below the Line."

"I know," the senior officer said wearily. "But we've got rules to follow. We'll follow them."

"And get another officer or two killed before we break it up. I know you're right, Cope, but we're up against a stone wall. We can't get over it but we can get around it."

MILLS had dismounted and was unlocking the cuffs of his prisoner. Copeland looked at Tim Powers and said sharply, "None of that, Tim. We'll stay on this side of the Line. Those are orders."

Powers herded the prisoner into the station where the three others were locked in the room that was supposed to be Copeland's office. Johnny Kelso opened the door, and the man sullenly shuffled in. Powers saw recognition in the man's eyes as he sighted the other prisoners, and knew his hunch was right. These men were all members of the same outfit.

Another hunch was beginning to take shape in his mind, too, but his hands were tied because of Copeland's orders. That stone wall—

He got his gunbelt and went outside to give Mills a hand, leaving Kelso on guard in the station. The Tucson officers would be down in a car in a couple of hours. Powers helped Mills unload the burros, water them at the small windmill trough back of the station, then mounted his horse.

"So they got Verne?" Mills finally said, thoughtfully. He had seen Thompson's body which lay on the floor inside the station, covered with gunny sacks.

Powers told him what had happened as they unsaddled back of the house. Then they went inside and Tim went to his room, cleaned up, and shaved. He stretched out on the bed, staring hard at the ceiling. Rules . . . rules . . . rules. The thought kept drumming through his mind. They shot a man down in cold blood, breaking all the rules of the law and common decency, yet you couldn't avenge him because of rules.

"The devil I can't!" Powers muttered

and set the alarm clock.

He rolled over on his side and was asleep almost at once. . . .

The ringing of the alarm-clock bell brought him awake in darkness. He reached over, shut it off, then sat up, shivering in his underclothes. No matter how hot the desert was during the day, it got cool enough in the early morning hours to make a man pull up the covers.

Powers dressed swiftly, buckled on his cartridge belt, unpinned his badge, and laid it on the bureau. He went out into the night, caught and saddled a fresh horse, then remembered with a curse that he had forgotten to clean the .30-30 before turning in. That had come from exhaustion. A man's mind didn't function when he was tired.

Powers swung aboard and loped away into the night. He circled the station wide enough so that Johnny Kelso couldn't hear the sound of his mount's hoofs, then loped eastward.

It didn't take long for him to come to the arroyo where it crossed the International Boundary. Powers swung down, bent over, and had no trouble at all finding the tracks made by the killer smuggler's mount. There was a sharp-looking yellow crescent high in the sky, and because of the soft sand he had no trouble following the tracks south. Presently they angled west, and he saw, far in the distance, a faint twinkle of light or two that was probably the dim bulbs mounted on telephone poles in the street of Nochecita, Sonora.

The trail cut south, swung over below the town, and four miles directly below town cut into the green belt. Here Powers had to dismount and go forward on foot, bending over in the darkness. He passed a few huts, and a frightened Mexican cur stood off in the distance and howled at him. There were a few fences now around the little green-pastured ranchos of the Mexicans; fences of thorny ocotillo interlaced with wire to hold them upright. Powers would have bet that numerous of those grazing burros out there in the night had carried a lot of loads besides wood.

BUT the fences made it better. They formed lanes, and down one of these led the road used by John Fogarty's big

automobile. Powers was playing his hunch now and when he finally lost the tracks, he rode until, two miles further on, he caught the low outlines of the cattleman's ranch buildings. He swung west, dismounted, hurriedly tied his horse, and crept on spurless boots toward the sheds. He hoped there was not a dog about the place. A Mexican cur could smell an American farther than it could smell a coyote.

Powers worked his way up to the sheds and paused, straining his eyes through the night at the darkened house. He wanted to go to the corral and see if he could find a sweat-encrusted horse, but a half dozen might have been ridden by Fogarty's vaqueros.

He went toward the corrals, anyway, working his way along slowly and inspecting several saddles on the top rail. All had the high, large horn and rigidly undished cantle of the Mexican design. All, except the last one. That was of American make, and there was a saddle gun scabbard on it.

That made it fairly certain. What little riding the cattleman had done when Powers had worked for him had been without a saddle gun. But the killer of Verne Thompson had dashed south of the Line and come straight to this ranch.

The officer's lips tightened grimly. He had proof but not the kind of proof that would hold up in court or allow him to take any kind of appropriate action. Powers went back to the sheds, prowling. He was hunting for something else now, and in a shed room with a crude, handmade padlock he found it.

Some men have strange hobbies, like the financier who paints pictures or the convict who tames humming birds. Powers himself had, for years, been fascinated by locks. He picked this one easily and went inside. The door creaked as it closed behind him.

He struck a match and stared at the cartons of tequila and mescal piled all the way to the ceiling. His eyes narrowed when he saw smaller packages, too. A brief examination was all that was necessary to reveal the contents. Drugs!

Small wonder that the Mexicans who had been captured wouldn't talk. Fogarty was a power down here now because his father had been a power here before him. It had been said along the Border that

John Fogarty could shoot down any Mexican in the middle of the street and never be brought to justice by Mexican officials. Either they were afraid of him or they took his bribes.

With such a free hand at smuggling, before the new immigration officers under Copeland put in appearance, the man must have cleaned up a tremendous fortune. It was clear now why Fogarty hadn't seen Red Selzer in months. A clever man.

Powers let the match die out, turned to go, then froze as he heard a hand rattle the loose chain on the door and a mutter of astonishment at its being unlocked. There was no time to lose, and the officer didn't lose it.

He made a lunge at the door and knocked the guard sprawling. A yell went out of the Mexican as he went down, his gun exploding accidentally as he fell. It roared out into the darkness, and horses snorted and leaped, while every dog within two miles began to bay.

Tim Powers ran for his horse, and for some strange reason the animal spooked. It reared back from the mesquite tree to which it was tied and snapped the reins. Its fleeing hoofs beat a tattoo across the green as it fled into the darkness. Behind the officer lights had flashed on all over the place and men had begun to run. A big light went on between house and barns and somebody—Fogarty, it sounded like—shouted orders in Spanish. A dozen armed Mexicans spread out across the field.

Powers ran on, hoping to get his horse. But it was a vain cause.

He ducked into the protective shadows of an ocotillo fence, cursing himself for spooking his mount by approaching it at a run. There was going to be plenty of hell to pay when Copeland found out—possibly dismissal from the service for both disobeying orders and breaking government rules. Powers was aware that it hadn't been right, but he was remembering Verne Thompson and how he had been shot down. He was thinking of the others, too, who, in the months to come, might suffer a similar fate.

LET it mean dismissal. He was still going to get the man who had killed Verne. As for Fogarty, there was no

doubt that man now was forewarned and that it was going to make it just so much harder to catch him in the future. He was intelligent and he was cunning. Tonight had proved him to be both unscrupulous and as slippery as an eel.

Tim Powers fell flat in the night as men came by within yards of him. Two who had run to the corral now loped out across the fields and pasture, probably after the mount. They came by, dim stalking outlines in the night. On impulse, Powers went in the opposite direction. He slipped back past the corrals and toward the house.

"Stand where you are!" somebody ordered.

He pulled up at the back of the house and unconsciously removed his hat. Helen Saunders surveyed him coolly over a leveled pistol.

"Mr. Fogarty warned me you were the type who would make trouble for him," she said. "I didn't believe it. I do now."

"Well?" he inquired softly.

"I'll have to hold you until he comes. It's trespassing—and by a branch of the service I respect. That is, I did."

"If you respect the service," he told her almost harshly, "who was the other American who rode in here and is on the ranch? The man who killed that officer yesterday afternoon?"

"I—I didn't see another American," she said hesitantly.

That was more than a man in Powers' frame of mind could take. He sneered at her, then walked up and took the gun out of her hand.

Under his orders she obediently turned off the flood light in the yard. Out in the night men were returning.

"Did you hear anything?" he demanded.

She finally nodded. "I did hear Fogarty cursing another man in English. I was in my room upstairs. But the voices were muffled, and I couldn't make out what they were saying."

"Fogarty is at the head of this smuggling," he told her a little more gently. "The evidence is out there in a padlocked shed room. Just thought you ought to know. But I wouldn't advise you to tell him that you've found out. It might cost you your life, Miss Saunders. He's a ruthless man. I'll be going now. You better go

back to bed and play possum."

He was gone into the night again. He had barely managed to get into the corrals when two Mexican riders came up, leading Powers' recalcitrant mount with the broken bridle reins. They came into the corral, laughing and talking in Spanish. As they swung down, Powers stepped out and jabbed them almost in their faces with his gun barrel.

"Silence!" he ordered in Spanish. "Give me your guns."

He threw the guns across the corral, swung up, having to bend a bit in the saddle on account of the short reins. Then he slammed in the steel and shot out of the gate at a run, drumming hard down the lane leading northward. A few yells floated on the night, followed by a dozen shots that whizzed harmlessly overhead.

IV

DAWN was breaking the eastern horizon when Tim Powers rode into the boarding house stable, hurriedly unsaddled, and slipped into his room. He had not been in bed ten minutes when Johnny Kelso came in, tired and yawning.

"Wake up, you bum," Johnny said, shaking him. "Some fellers have all the luck. You sleep all night in a nice bed while I have to keep awake. Hurry it up. Cope's already at the station and says to come on over."

"Anything special?" Powers asked casually, swinging his legs over the edge and beginning to dress.

"Don't know. I got a hunch there is. Fogarty fogged that gas buggy through the station about ten minutes ago and is talking to him. He's madder than a wet hornet. Say, remind me to find out some time why a wet hornet is supposed to be madder'n a dry one. Ho-hum, I'm tired. Going to get some breakfast and roll in."

"What about the prisoners?" Powers asked, getting into the clothes he had but scant minutes before removed from his person.

"Two of the boys came down from Tucson in a car and got them. They took Verne to the undertaking parlor, too."

Powers washed his face, went down, and ate a hurried breakfast. That done, he went out, took Johnny Kelso's bridle off its peg, saddled up a fresh horse, and

quickly rode over to the station.

The car was still under the arch, and a touch of uneasiness hit Tim Powers when he saw that Helen Saunders was with the cattleman. Black eyes blazing in anger met those of the young officer as he came up. Copeland was not angry, but his face was suspicious as he looked at Powers.

"Morning," Powers greeted and doffed his hat to the girl sitting in the back seat.

Copeland nodded curtly, and Fogarty ignored Powers. "Where have you been the past few hours, Tim?" the inspector said.

"Was I supposed to be some place?" Powers asked blandly.

"According to Fogarty, yes. A place where you had no business."

"I was in bed," Powers said. Which was the truth. He had been in bed—for a short time, at least.

"Fogarty says different. He says you raided his ranch a few hours ago, shot up the place, assaulted two of his men, and disarmed them."

Powers had the cigarette pack in hand. He lit a cigarette and exhaled, looking at the ranchman. He didn't look at the girl. He had told her the truth about what kind of a man she was working for. If she still cared to stick with Fogarty, then he had no time to waste on her.

"Anybody see me down there?" he asked Copeland.

The inspector looked at the cattleman. "Well?" he snapped.

Fogarty let out an oath. "It was dark, but it was him all right," he snapped back. "Oh, I don't suppose I could prove it, but it was Powers. I bluntly warn you, Copeland, that I pull a lot of strings in this country. I don't care whether you're federal men or not. I don't give a whoop. If I have to get on the wires to Washington and start burning them up, I'll pop somebody's shirt tail, and don't you forget! Powers, I gave you a warning yesterday. I'll repeat it this morning. If I ever catch you fooling around on any of my property, either north or south of the Line, I'll have you shot on sight. Get that clear! All right, Juan. Let's go."

He slammed his way into the rear seat beside the girl, and the grinning driver drove off.

"Come inside," Copeland said to Tim Powers.

Powers followed him in. When he came out again, he was sweating. He could understand Copeland's position but he was half angry at the veteran for wanting to follow the rules when a man like Verne Thompson had just been shot and killed by a smuggler. These men broke the rules, and the best way to catch them was to break more.

HE MOUNTED his horse and rode eastward along the Line on a fifteen-mile patrol. He was due back by sundown but he knew he was on the right track. He had told Copeland what he had found below the Line, but the inspector was such a stickler for rules that he had been almost more angry at the manner of the discovery than pleased at the knowledge.

"I've half suspected it all along," he had said. "I've known Fogarty for years and his father before him, an unscrupulous, robbing old devil if one ever lived. But we'll get them in the right time and in our own way—by following the rules."

"Rules," muttered Powers again. "Well, I'm on this side of the Border this time."

He finished his patrol as the rules required, for he had plenty of time. It was about ten miles north to Fogarty's American ranch, and the party wouldn't begin until after dark.

"Well, anyhow—" the officer grinned ruefully—"she did invite me."

Sundown found him miles to the north and east, where the desert gave way to foothills clumped by scrubby timber. The receding saguaros finally faded into the darkness that was coming down so quickly. He worked his way into gullies, careful to keep clear of the sky line and using all available cover. He knew Fogarty had meant it when he said that Tim Powers would be shot on sight for trespassing, federal officer or no federal officer. Most men would have hesitated before such an outburst, but John Fogarty believed in his power and his influence.

Powers moved on at a cautious walk, keeping his mount in the sandy bottoms of the gullies. Now and then a cow trotted off into the darkness, but he was pretty certain there would be no real danger until he approached closer to the lights which were pin pointing about two miles away.

The thing puzzling Powers right now was Fogarty's outlet. The man was a

smuggler—that much the officer had proved by his visit to the place below the Line. But one or two aspects still were not clear. First, the drugs. None of the Mexicans caught in recent months, nor those captured yesterday, had carried anything but tequila and mescal. Yet what had been found in those small packages in the shed proved beyond any doubt that Fogarty was running narcotics. Where was he taking them? Who was buying them?

Powers worked his mount out into the flatter country, where the lights in the distance now showed up brighter. Less than a half mile from them he reluctantly swung down, tied the horse, and went forward cautiously, utilizing all possible cover. So far there had been no trouble, nor had he expected any. Fogarty certainly would not have his men out prowling around miles of range. If he expected Powers to pay him a visit, his men would be on guard around the ranch.

Presently the outlines of the sprawling corrals loomed up faintly in the darkness. Powers, flat on his stomach now, lay watching and listening. It was all pretty familiar—lights blazing from every window and the tinny squawk of the phonograph desecrating the night with a popular one-step. He saw the forms of men and women ragtiming past the open windows, and his eyes, more accustomed to the darkness now, caught the outlines of several long touring cars in the yard.

They would be there until almost daylight. Powers wondered about Helen Saunders and inched on. He finally reached a corner of a corral and paused in the shadow, pondering his next move. He had another of his hunches, this time about those narcotics, but how to take action on it was entirely another matter. His best bet probably would be to wait until the early morning hours, then make a try.

Nor did he have any illusions about the outcome in case the hunch was wrong. It would be either death or dismissal from the service. Powers hunched his body into a more comfortable position for a long wait.

But he was wrong on that score. He didn't have long to wait.

He never did know how the two men sneaked up on him so quietly. He heard footsteps, muffled in the soft, dustlike carpeting of dried manure around the out-

side of the corral. He rolled over instinctively and reached for his gun, and two dark forms sprang at him.

There wasn't time to get his gun free, because he had buttoned the latch strap on the sheath to prevent losing the weapon while he crawled. It wouldn't come loose. So he rolled over on his back and jackknifed his booted feet, lashing out and upward at a man who was spread-eagling over him in a dive. He caught the fellow in the stomach, and the man toppled over backward with a yell that was half grunt.

THE other man landed hard, and the immigration officer rolled his head aside as the barrel of a six-shooter slashed down. It thudded into the dirt where his head had been. Powers grabbed a wrist, wrenched hard, jerking his attacker down. He struck out hard at a face and then, as they strained closer, he recognized his opponent, even in the darkness.

"Adams!" he burst out at the man he had fought with here on this ranch and who supposedly hated Fogarty. "You yellow coyote! Verne punched cows with you. He was your friend!"

"He was a cussed officer!" came the panted retort.

They rolled and threshed, Powers still holding onto that straining gun wrist. Their grunts mingled with the thud of blows, Powers fighting desperately to end it quickly. He hoped that phonograph would keep blaring, that the men in the bunkhouse were asleep. In a final twist, the officer rolled Adams over, twisted the gun free, and swung hard with the barrel.

He rose, his chest heaving, wheeling to look for the other man who had attacked him. That one was a very sick man indeed. Two sharp boot heels in the solar plexus, propelled by a pair of legs that could cling to a bucking bronc, had him sitting, hands over his stomach, gasping for breath. Powers snapped out handcuffs and put one on a wrist. He hauled Adams's recumbent form over, pushed an arm around the corner post of the corral, and linked the two men. He linked their other hands, too.

They might get free, but they would have to tear down one corner of a solidly built horse corral to do it.

Adams sat up, wiping his bloody face and mumbling. He looked up.

"I ought to have killed you, too," he

muttered through swelling lips.

"You ought not to have killed Verne," Powers said. "You'll hang for it."

"The devil I will! Fogarty'll get me out of it. I can slide back across the Border and be safe."

The phonograph had ceased playing. There was just laughter now, coming through the open windows. Laughing men and women strolled out on the porch. Powers bent over the two handcuffed men.

"One sound out of either of you, and I'll come back here and fit this gun barrel to the curve of your skull," he said grimly.

He crept forward toward the line of cars, coming up beside Fogarty's big one. He was hoping that the phonograph would start blaring again and the others would go back inside. He wanted to get at the tools beneath the rear seat.

But the people didn't go back. Three men came toward the car—Fogarty and two sleek, well-dressed men who looked like prosperous businessmen from Tucson. Powers flattened himself on the opposite side. Fogarty was laughing, a drink still in one hand. His laugh was interrupted by a curse from one of the men, loud enough for those on the porch to hear, as well as the words that followed.

"A flat tire! Curse it, John, I must have picked up some cactus or hit a sharp rock coming down tonight."

"Got a spare?" another asked.

"No, mine's in the shop being fixed."

"Well, you can have mine. It's there on the back of the car. Come on, I'll help you change it."

It was then that Adams's stentorian yell of warning came from the corner of the horse corral sixty yards away.

"Fogarty! Powers is here—right there by your car! We're handcuffed to the fence. Get him, or we're all sunk!"

The startled curses were not faked this time. Powers leaped around the end of the big touring and covered the three men.

"Hands up, quick!" he snapped. "You're under arrest!"

John Fogarty cried out sharply toward the darkness west of them, "Smith! Colonel! Quick!"

Powers wheeled as running boots came nearer. He threw one shot over the heads of the running men. They fell flat, then Fogarty was on him, swinging and curs-

ing. While the two other men stood staring in indecision Fogarty and Powers went at it, Powers hoping he could pin his man before those other guards came running.

They came running, all right, as Tim Powers and the ranch owner struggled erect, and the sweetest sound he ever heard came then, hard and commanding. It was Copeland's voice.

"Stand fast! Federal officers!"

The ranch seemed to be swarming with them. Powers rocked away from his antagonist, panting, as a half dozen immigration and customs officers surrounded everybody. Powers saw Helen Saunders looking at him. "So you didn't quit?" he said.

BEFORE she could answer, two officers brought the two handcuffed guards into the circle of light by the porch, and two more came up with Adams and the other man Powers had captured.

Copeland was eyeing Tim Powers, his face pretty grim.

"I had a hunch you'd be pulling one like this tonight," the inspector clipped. "So just to protect you I called Tucson, got a federal search warrant for the ranch, and had some of the officers there bring it down. I hope for your sake that you know what you're doing, Powers."

"Playing a hunch, Inspector," Powers told him. "None of the Mexicans ever carried dope. Nobody else's tracks showed up, crossing the Line. So the narcotics I found on Fogarty's place had to come through only one way—through the station. There's only about one place in his car we haven't checked—the spare tire. He was getting ready to change it and put it on the car of these two men, who're supposed to have a flat, but I notice they haven't."

"Hmmm, I see," Copeland said. "Boys, take off that spare tire."

"You can't do that!" Fogarty yelled. "This is my ranch and my car. I'll break every one of you! I'll pull strings and have every man jack of you back punching cows where you belong!"

The rattle of tire tools being taken from under the rear seat shut off his words, and five minutes later the tire, free of the rim, lay on the ground while Copeland squatted beside it and pulled out package after package of narcotics.

Fogarty stood subdued now, licking his lips, a frightened man. He knew what was in store. Somehow Powers found himself standing next to Helen.

"You didn't answer my question," he reminded her.

"About quitting? I did quit this afternoon before we came up from below. Made the pretext that I wanted to work in Tucson for a while. But he said there was no way for me to go until after the party, and then I could ride up with some of these people."

He suddenly felt glad. "Are you going?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied simply, though something in the way she said it made him feel as though she had hesitated.

"You can ride up with me," he told her. "I've got to go up about tomorrow and present some evidence before the U. S. commissioner."

Inspector Copeland looked at him, at both of them, and his stern face softened just a trifle.

"You're lucky on hunches, Tim," he

said. "If this one hadn't panned out, I'd have been forced to dismiss you from the service for deliberately disobeying orders twice within twenty-four hours. So maybe you'd better take a few days off in Tucson in the office there in exchange for one of their boys until you learn about less zeal and more discipline and how to follow the rules."

"Yes, sir," Tim Powers grinned, looking sideways at Helen.

He took her to Tucson the following day and he worked there long enough to become engaged. He married her the day before Fogarty's trial opened. The trial was one of the shortest in federal court for that district.

When it was over, John Fogarty was on his way to Leavenworth to serve from twenty to twenty-five years. By the time Tim and Helen came back to the Line to live in one half of Mrs. Elkins' big house, Adams was in a death cell in Florence, waiting to pay with a noose for the cold-blooded killing of Immigration Officer Verne Thompson.

LICK FOR THE RED MAN

NO DOUBT the wild Plains Indians often craved sweets, living as they did, principally on a meat diet. At any rate, after the Indian first came in contact with the white man and learned something of his food, he became an inveterate beggar for sugar and for molasses.

Old Texas trail drivers have frequently related that as their herds were being driven through the Indian Territory, Indians would come to their camp and beg for sugar and would eat every bit of that given to them. One driver recalls that once a band of Indians came into his camp carrying a large coffee can. They wanted "lick", the cowboy name for syrup or molasses.

At Fort Rice in 1868, many hundreds of Plains Indians and numerous high-ranking United States army officers met in a great peace powwow. The Indians had to be fed and large quantities of army supplies were unloaded from a steamboat in order to satisfy their hunger. These supplies included hardtack bread, sugar, coffee, barrels of pickled pork and of sorghum. The heads of the barrels were knocked in and the Indians helped themselves.

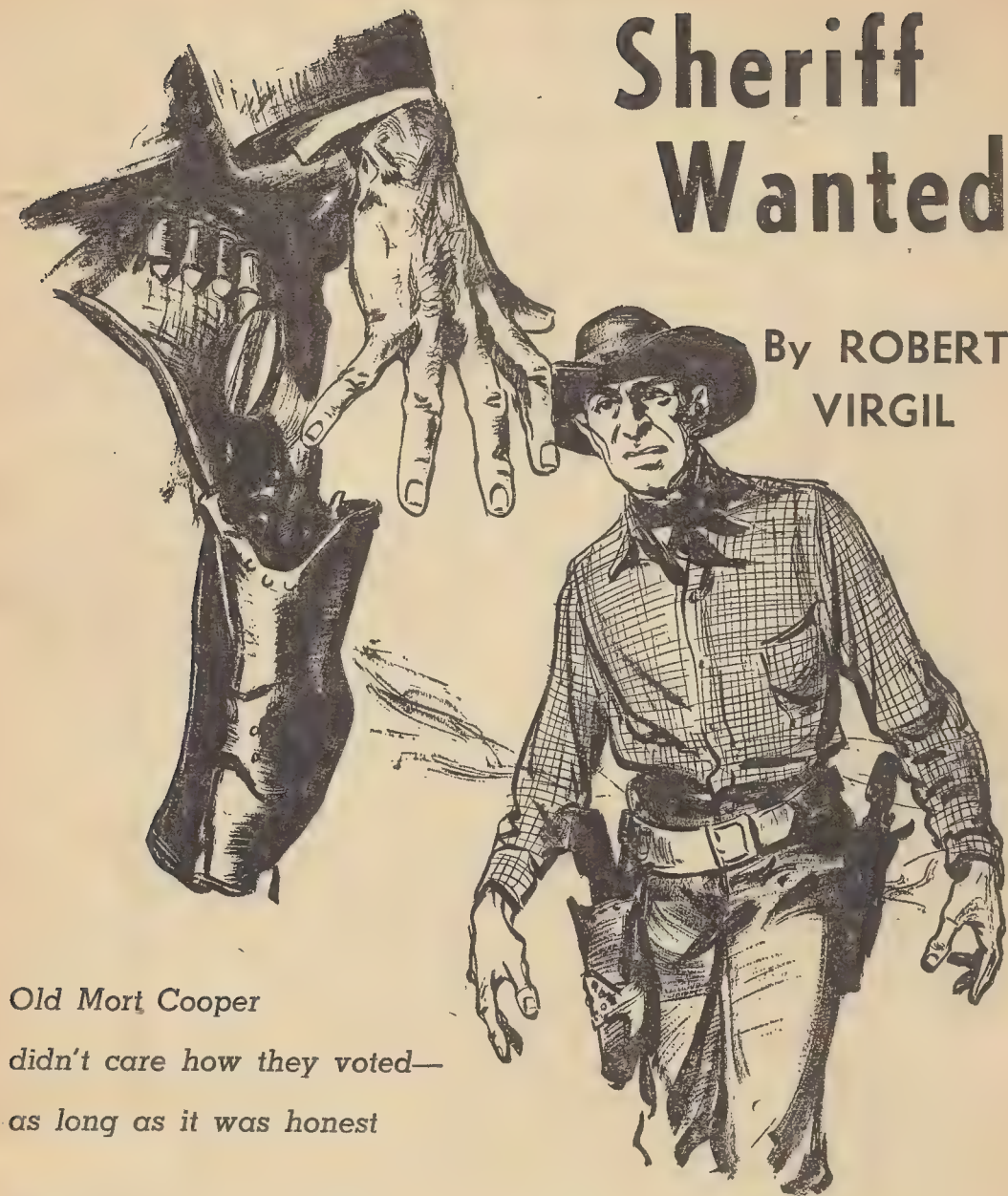
The Indians had never seen sorghum before and didn't know just how to handle it. They tried to dip it out with their hands. Some of them then tried cups. At length one Indian produced a long stick, poked it to the bottom of the barrel, pulled it out and passed it from mouth. Each person took a lick of the dripping syrup, dozens crowding around trying to get near the stick. In a short time the faces, hands, hair, and clothing of the Indians were covered with molasses. The sorghum barrels were centers of great jostling crowds until they were empty.

—Roy Holt



Sheriff Wanted

By ROBERT
VIRGIL



Old Mort Cooper

didn't care how they voted—

as long as it was honest

IF YOU'VE ever been in the Southwest, you've probably seen towns like ours and if you've looked around very much you've seen a courthouse like ours, too. It's red stone with a terraced lawn around it that's held together by a low stone wall where nearly everyone downtown spends at least a few minutes every day

sitting in the sun and hearing all of the latest news.

As a county seat, our small town doesn't have much of a county to be the seat of. It's all one big ranch, the Larkin ranch. No one seems to know for sure why old Hal Larkin ever let them start a town in the middle of his spread, but he did and

he ran it just like he runs the ranch.

Once in a while you'd hear something about that at the courthouse square, but mostly the people didn't talk about it. That was because Larkin's hands were really the ones who ran the town, and there were nearly always a few of them around. It just wasn't wise to run Larkin down in front of them. They'd start a fight on some little pretext and the law, Larkin's law—for he kept his son in office as sheriff—wouldn't do anything to the cowhands.

Now and then a few of us business people in town would get together and talk to John Larkin, but he always soft-soaped us out of our anger. Sure, we knew that if we really got together, we could throw him, the county judge, and the county attorney out of office, but nobody wanted to stick his neck out to organize us, especially around election time.

So the conversations at the courthouse wall were pretty guarded. About the first thing that came up was when Jimmy Harfield told old Mort Cooper off. Mort was our deputy sheriff. We never did figure out what he was deputy for, except to be the goat.

When the sheriff knew there was likely to be trouble with the hands, especially on a rousing Saturday night, he'd disappear and leave Mort in charge. Mort's orders were to leave the ranch hands alone. He did and he kept his job. He'd been deputy for ten years, exactly as long as John Larkin had been sheriff.

Mort was just a common, ordinary looking old cuss. He always dressed the same, in a pair of shiny black britches, a white shirt, black string tie, and a light corduroy jacket topped off with an old hat that had once been tan but had aged to a darker shade. He never wore a gun. When we kidded him about that, he always acted a little sad and said he'd done his share of gun toting in the earlier days. Now, he'd say, he'd rather just be a quiet officer in a peaceful little community like this where he didn't really need a gun.

We always got a kick out of that. New-comers would pump him to get his story

of the history of various places around the state where he'd been in the early days. We'd nudge each other and watch the greenhorn take it in.

Old Mort was always ready to talk about himself. He'd sit there with his knees crossed and tug at the ends of his white mustache and get a dreamy look in his eyes. We always figured it was a pretty good act.

THE day Jimmy Harfield set him straight there were several of us sitting on the wall. I was watching the door of my drug store across the street to make sure that too many customers didn't go in at once and swamp the one clerk I had.

Julius Barnaby, the jeweler, came across to sit a few minutes, and old Mort was handing him his watch that he wanted something done to when he overheard Harfield talking to me. He turned around slowly and looked at us. His eyes were mild, kind of faded blue.

"What's that?" he asked.

Harfield got a little mad and let him see it wasn't any of his business.

"I said that I'm asking folks to scratch out Larkin's name and write me in for sheriff on their ballots in the election three weeks from now," he said.

"First I'd heard of it," commented Mort. "You ought to do right well, Jimmy, being a war veteran and all. It'd be a pleasure to work with you."

Jimmy's face got red. He looked at me and then off down the street. Barnaby shuffled his feet and stepped to the curb as if he was getting ready to go back to his shop.

"Well, Mort," Jimmy said finally, "I don't see any reason not to be honest about it. Truth is, I wouldn't keep you on as deputy. You're getting pretty old, Mort."

Mort liked to talk about his age himself, but that was the first time I'd ever heard anyone else bring it up like that. He kind of reared back, and his eyes didn't look so faded as usual.

"Old, Jimmy?" he drawled. "I don't

think I'm too old to take care of this job. I can do what I'm told."

Now Jimmy was madder, because the old man was forcing him to go farther with the truth.

"That's the trouble," he said, "you do what you're told. You're no law officer. You just make it easy for a bunch of crooks to run this county. You're a has-been, Mort, if you ever were anything, and that's all Larkin wants from a man in your job. You couldn't begin to handle Jason Goodwright."

Jason was Larkin's foreman out at the ranch and his chief strong-arm boy in town. He was mean sometimes, and the other hands were always around to back him up.

"I haven't been told to handle Jason," said Mort.

"No," retorted Jimmy, "and you're not likely to be, any more than you want to be."

With this, Jimmy turned and walked away down the sidewalk. Barnaby, still standing at the curb, glanced at Mort and made an embarrassed wave with his hand before he started across the street. Mort just looked after Jimmy and still stood there even after Jimmy had turned into a bar about a block down. Then Mort looked at me. He seemed older, and there was a strange look in his eyes as if he was mad and hurt at the same time.

"He thinks I'm afraid," he said in a hollow voice.

Then, without waiting for the answer that I couldn't have given, anyway, he walked slowly to the courthouse steps and disappeared through the doorway.

Mort didn't join us at the wall any more. We saw him on the street and around the courthouse, but except for saying "howdy" in response to our greetings, he was silent.

Larkin, the sheriff, laughed when he heard about Harfield's write-in campaign. He had a regular politician's laugh, hearty and full of self-confidence, but we knew the man.

"Shucks," he said in a homey manner, "the folks won't go against the way they voted in the primary. There's no one

else on the ballot for sheriff but me, and they won't go to all that trouble. I'll be re-elected."

We knew he'd get his dad's hands to use their influence, too. Without scaring the people, he didn't have a chance and he knew it.

SURE enough, he laid his cards on the table when he announced a week before election day that he was going to be gone for about three days at that time. The announcement came out Friday morning in our weekly paper and said he was taking a short leave to attend to personal business. We knew he was getting out of the way so that Jason and his boys could put the pressure on and get him re-elected.

Old Mort was left in charge, the paper said.

A couple of days before the election, a few of Larkin's boys started a roughhouse in one of the town's honkytonks, and Jimmy Harfield's brother, Don, was pretty badly whipped. Nothing was done about it. Jason started telling everyone that he'd appointed himself an observer at the polls and that he'd see them there when they came to vote. Nobody argued with him.

I guess, as one of the election officials, I should have tried to do something about that but I didn't see what I could do, except get whipped in a fight. The day before election, even Harfield had become pretty scarce, and those of us who were backing him were getting a little doubtful about his qualifications.

The morning of election day I met the other three election officials at the courthouse where tables had been set up in the halls to form the polling place. We cast our own ballots and then got things ready to open up.

Jason Goodwright was the first person inside the doors when we unlocked them. He acted cheerful and friendly and took a seat on one corner of the polling official's table while he cracked jokes with us. Then Barnaby walked in, and we gave him a ballot form. Jason watched him

closely as he seated himself at one of the smaller tables along the wall.

"Sure hope you're voting right, Julius," Jason said.

Barnaby got a flustered look on his face.

"How I vote's my own business," he said.

"Heck, yes," agreed Jason. "I just said—"

"You don't have any right to say anything or even to be here," I broke in. "Your polling place is out at the ranch. This is for the town precinct."

"Don't pop off at me, fatso," growled Jason, getting to his feet. "I'm here in the interest of a friend and I aim to see that the election is honest."

"What would you know about that?" asked a new voice.

None of us had seen old Mort walk in because we'd all been watching Jason. Now the foreman stood half turned to the doorway with his mouth hanging open, scarcely believing what he'd heard.

"What—well, if it ain't old Mort," he said, laughing. He was still a little surprised, though. "How's sheriffing today, Mort, with the boss away?"

"Tol'able, Jason," Mort replied calmly. "Now, unless you've been officially appointed election supervisor, I'll have to ask you to leave."

"What!" Jason roared. "You old coot, you're getting too big for your britches."

He started toward Mort. The hand that swept down and brushed back the bottom of the corduroy jacket to clear the handle of the .45 that hung on Mort's hip was an experienced one.

"Jason," Mort said quietly, "I haven't decided what I'll do yet if you come any further. I could shoot you or I could whip you to the floor with this hogleg. You know I could do either."

JASON stopped in midstride and was staring into Mort's eyes. He backed up a step or two.

"You're crazy, Cooper," he said. "This'll mean your job when John gets back."

"Maybe, but till he does, I'm sheriff and I aim to see that these people get to vote

as they please. A man gets old, Jason, looks for comfort, I guess, and doesn't see things too clearly. Sometimes he gets a chance to straighten up and get his respect back. Anyhow, I don't think I'll want to be deputy here anymore," said Mort.

The heavily-veined hand that hung over the butt of the gun didn't waver a bit as he continued. "Now, Jason, I think it's my duty to put you away for the day since you've made threats against the peace. You know where the calaboose is—right up them stairs."

Jason was more surprised than ever.

"Now I know you're crazy," he hollered, "but you're not going to lock me up."

"Move, Jason!" snapped Mort, and there was a touch of steel in his voice. "Or I'll have to ask one of these folks to help me carry you up."

The big foreman swore but he started up the steps that led to the county jail on the top floor. Mort followed him, and we could hear the clanging of the steel door on one of the cells.

Everyone just sat there for a moment, then Barnaby went ahead marking his ballot and, I supposed, stuck with Harfield, because I saw him make a long line with his pencil and write something in beside it.

After a while Mort came back downstairs and stood around near the door. Barnaby finished and left, and in a few minutes a couple of ladies came in. Mort gravely tipped his hat to them, like he always did. Then more people showed up, and for a while things were pretty busy.

About midmorning one of Larkin's cowhands came ambling up to the door, but Mort shooed him off without any trouble.

It was nearly noon when the phone in the sheriff's office rang, and Mort went in to answer it. He was in there several minutes. When he came back out, he had a shotgun over his arm. We watched him walk down the steps and out to his car.

We heard later what had happened. Five of Larkin's boys had come into town to do a little terrorizing on their own. Of

course, all the beer joints are closed on election day, but they'd got into a fight with the owner of one, and it was his wife who'd called Mort.

When he got there, the five hands were trying to use the bar owner as a ram to batter down the door. At least, they were threatening to if his wife didn't unlock the place. They just looked at Mort when he drove up and didn't even bother to put their captive down.

"That's all for today, boys," Mort said as he stepped out of his car, the shotgun pointed. "Line up and get ready to march."

Cursing, they dropped the bar owner in the dust and glared at the old man. The leader of the band, a tall, ugly fellow, stepped forward a few feet but not too close to the muzzle of the shotgun.

"You blowed your top, Mort?" he asked. "What are you aiming to do?"

"I'm aiming to lock you boys up," Mort announced calmly. "Now, there's nineteen double aught buckshots in this double-barreled scattergun that says I have the authority. Want to argue about it?"

They lined up and marched single file ahead of Mort's car as he drove slowly back to the courthouse. When he herded them through the hallway, we gaped, but Mort said nothing.

OLD MAN LARKIN came storming in before Mort came back down from the jail. He blustered around wanting to know where that "crazy fool" was. Just then Mort came down the stairs.

"Mr. Larkin," he said politely, "control yourself, or you'll join the rest of your crew upstairs."

"I'll control all right," threatened Larkin. "I'll control you right out of here. Where'd my son go on this—this leave or vacation, or whatever it is?"

"Well," Mort said, "he told me, but I wouldn't want to bother him. He said to call him only in case of an acute emergency."

"This is an emergency," said Larkin. "You've violated his orders."

"Mr. Larkin—" Mort tilted his head a little and narrowed his eyes—"just what do you know about his orders?"

He watched the rancher sputter for a minute.

"No," he continued, "the emergency's over—if there was one. I reckon I've handled it okay. Now, I've got a lot of respect for you for having built up that big ranch from scratch. Between you and me, we've seen lots of water go under the bridge. I kind of helped build this state, too, though it wasn't this part, and I think you and I should take pride in seeing it's run right. That's what I'm doing, Mr. Larkin, and like I said, you're welcome here as a peaceful citizen, but we've got a place for you if you ain't satisfied to be one."

Larkin didn't answer that. He just left. Mort watched him go before he spoke to the rest of us.

"Go right ahead with your voting, folks," he said as he patted the breech of the shotgun. "We just adopted an amendment to the local constitution."

There wasn't any more trouble, and when we closed the polls and started counting the ballots, old Mort left. He didn't say anything, just walked out and let the door swing shut behind him. He stood outside there for a minute, watching us work, then turned and went away into the darkness.

It was about midnight when a group of us went out to his place. He'd rented a little house out on the edge of town where he lived alone. He wasn't there. When we pushed open the door and went in we saw that all his gear was gone. He'd left us.

We'd like to find him now. You see, when Julius Barnaby voted that morning he didn't write Harfield's name in; he wrote in the name of Mort Cooper. Then he went around town telling everybody what'd happened, and they wrote Mort's name in, too.

So, if you see old Mort Cooper anywhere, please tell him we're waiting for our sheriff.

SNOW in the CANYON

A Western Classic

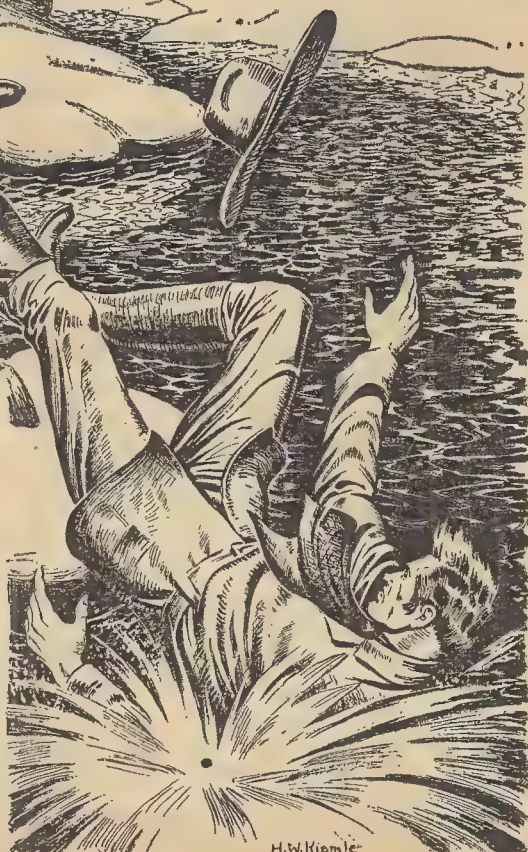
By
ERNEST HAYCOX



Ringabaugh fell back into the creek

THE CALL began as a plain shout far up the narrow canyon. Tom Rowley paid no attention to it at first, since he was busy with the Rucker wagon—it having cast a tire. They had thickened the rim of the wheel with thin strips of oak and now they had a fire going and were mauling the heated iron tire back

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H.W. Klemke

on the wheel. The call, fading for a moment, was caught up and cried forward by another man; it came on around the rocky turnings of the canyon and rose over the slashing racket of the swollen creek: "Meeting at the captain's wagon!"

The tire was on and could take its own time shrinking to the wheel. Tom Rowley killed the fire and turned up the canyon, passing wagons and groups of people warming themselves at rain-dampened fires. Reaching his father's wagon, he climbed into its shelter and looked down upon the elder Rowley, who, covered by patchwork quilts, shook out a strong chill. His mother sat on a pile of blankets, mending clothes; the light was very poor. She was a wonderful woman, he thought, with more patience than any man. "I'd better go see what that meeting's for," Tom said to his father.

"It's for arguing a way out of this calamity," his father said. "There's come to be too damned much quarreling in this train. But go see anyhow."

"Change your clothes first," said his mother. "You've not got a dry stitch on."

"They'd soon be wet again," said Tom Rowley. He left the wagon to pass other wagons in a crooked line, end to end. There wasn't any road through this narrow gut; it was a matter of cautiously skirting boulders awash in three feet of water, of easing by rocky shoulders which at places cramped the canyon into a throat scarcely accommodating a span of oxen.

Two thousand miles lay behind them, and the great valley which was to be their home waited seventy miles forward—only five days' travel if they could escape these hills which came against them like the jaws of a vise.

December's fat rain collected on the high mountain slopes and rushed down to make a raceway of the creek. In three days the hundred wagons of the train had traveled six miles along the canyon; there remained six more miles to go before they got out of it.

This rain was ice-cold and the weather not far from snow. He climbed the side of the ravine to get away from the water,

noting that the grazing oxen had stripped the grass clean everywhere.

Not far from the Hunt wagon, one animal lay dead, scarcely more than a skeleton covered by hide. Teresa Hunt, wrapped in a man's blue overcoat, chopped pine limbs to feed the blaze which kept the coffeepot boiling for her family lying chilled within their wagon. Everybody seemed to have taken cold overnight; there was one new grave on the hillside. Tom Rowley said, "Now, then," and took the ax from Teresa.

A TARPAULIN made a shelter from the Hunt wagon to a near-by alder tree. Teresa stepped beneath it to a camp cupboard hinged to the wagon's side, and got a cup and returned to the fire to pour him coffee. He loaded the fire with wood and, under the tarpaulin's shelter, nursed the hot cup between his hands; this was the first comfortable thing he had touched for six hours.

He was made of big bones and a thick dark skin, and six months of steady riding had trimmed him to lankness. Black wet hair glittered beneath the edge of his hat and his eyes were a lively, wonderful blue. He had a broad mouth, which, in smiling, threw warmth back into his eyes.

"People," he said, "are discouraged. If we were in open country they'd feel we could run from trouble. But we're all stuck together and that's what scares 'em."

She made a gesture with her shoulder.

"We can wait. We can be patient."

Of all this misery she had no part. A rain-blackened scarf covered her head and the lifted collar of the overcoat came around her face; she was as pleasant as though this were the starting day in springtime back on the Missouri.

He admired her and he was somewhat afraid of her, for her people had been prosperous in Tennessee, with a big house and a good deal of land and fine furniture. He had come out of an unplastered cabin. That made a difference, at least to him. He looked at her over the coffee cup and caught the direct interest of her eyes, and a moment's rashness was like a hand at

his back, shoving him forward. He finished the coffee and gave her the cup. "I had better get to that meeting," he said, and left the shelter of his tarpaulin.

THE WAGON tops shed a dull white glow in the mealy light. There was the smell of snow around him. By night, with the temperature dropping, it would probably come heavily in and trap the train. To make things worse, there wasn't three days' bacon or flour left in the entire outfit. He went by the Sutter wagon and saw the two old folks sitting inside as though it were their parlor at home—old man Sutter idly scratching out a tune on his fiddle and Grandma Sutter swaying in the rocker which was the first thing out of her wagon at nightfall and the last thing in, at moving time.

He passed more groups around their fires and heard fretfulness in their talk. They were ready for a quarrel or a panic.

Captain Wilson was thirty wagons to the rear. A great fire burned here and a big circle of men stood around it, the captain standing very much alone in the circle's center while he listened in solemn patience to Al Ringabaugh. Tom Rowley watched Ringabaugh with instant discontent. He had heard enough of that positive voice which all across the plains had been a harp for opposition and fault-finding to play on.

The man had the bully chest of an auctioneer and the cranky face of an abolitionist.

"It was bad judgment coming into this place. Too many wagons. We ought to have gone through a few at a time. Now we're stuck."

Captain Wilson was fifty, and the trials of commanding this train over the country had taught him self-restraint. Ringabaugh was a gadfly he solemnly endured. He said patiently, "It was the only way open, Al. We had to take it. We've got two things now to do—"

"Let's hear 'em before we decide whether to do 'em or not," interrupted Ringabaugh.

"We've got to send a man ahead to the

valley for some food. I've already done it."

"We ought to have talked about it first," said Ringabaugh.

"Then," said Captain Wilson mildly, "we've got to make up crews to go down to the front end and clear the road and help fix the crippled wagons. I want—"

"One good blizzard would kill the whole outfit," said Ringabaugh. "We'd never get out. When a wagon breaks down, we've got to push it aside. We can't fool with cripples."

"We started together. We got to finish together. We can't leave anybody behind."

"Let them get on somebody else's wagon then," said Ringabaugh. "Nobody's got the right, just because he wants to save his wagon, to stop the rest of us from going ahead."

He had a point there, Tom Rowley decided reluctantly. Each man was free to decide for himself what he wanted to do.

Captain Wilson said, "Once you start to abandon wagons you'll make everybody think we're in real trouble, and then you'll have a stampede. Let's be slow about it."

"If a storm comes tonight," said Ringabaugh, "it won't be slow."

Another man spoke. "Cap'n, maybe it might ease the strain on the food if some of the younger folks could go ahead on foot, or on horses, to the settlements."

"You'd have people straggling all over hell's half acre," said the captain. "Some would get lost. And remember, there's still Indians around here to pick off strays."

The captain had a point too, Tom Rowley thought. It was a hard thing to know when a man was free to do as he pleased and when his freedom hurt other people and couldn't be tolerated. He stood still, made uncomfortable by his thoughts.

"Appears to me," said Ringabaugh, "you don't like anybody else's notions."

"I've got two hundred people to think about," said the captain gravely. "Now then, shall we stick? I want to know."

The sentiment, coming slowly from one man and another, seemed to be that they

stick together. The captain said, "All right, we do. We'll have another meeting tomorrow. Let's get crews down to the front end."

"I don't join any agreement," said Ringabaugh. "If I think I'm in danger, I'll drive my wagon right down this line. I take care of myself. Let others do the same."

"I suppose," said the captain resignedly, "that's your privilege."

The discomfort grew within Tom Rowley. Was it Ringabaugh's privilege or wasn't it? If the man tried to leave the line, he'd sooner or later jam himself with another wagon, and then they'd all be hung up for hours. His irritation toward Ringabaugh grew stronger. Rights or no rights, the man was a fool for making it so hard on everybody else.

He waited for the captain to say something that would pull the crowd together and make it unnecessary to argue about the matter of one man against the train, but he was disappointed.

The captain said, "Let's get down to the front of the train," and turned away.

TOM ROWLEY moved downward, taking to the hillside to avoid the ox teams now in motion. The whole line became a jerky, creeping procession, wagons lurching over boulders and dropping into pockets of the creek bed with sudden pistol crashes of sound.

By the time he reached the Hunt wagon, the column had again halted. A call came back up the line: "Broken wheel!" His glance went to Teresa, to that calmness which struck deeper into him each time he saw it.

"You ought to wear a coat," she said.

He grinned. "It would be something else to dry out," he said.

He continued down the canyon. The wagon with the broken wheel was a quarter-mile below, sagged crosswise and stoppering the canyon completely. It was Ed McDermitt's outfit and McDermitt stood on the rock which had wrecked him, looking down in hard thought at the broken wheel. A crowd gathered, and somebody said, "We can get some saplings and

pry the thing high enough to prop up the axle. Bailey's got a spare front wheel."

There were men enough to handle that job, Tom decided, and moved along the creek until he came to a dozen younger men heaving away at a boulder around which the creek boiled violently. They had a chain around it and two span of oxen hooked to the chain. Poking heavy oak poles under the rock, the men pried as the oxen hauled. Knee-deep in water, Tom laid his weight to the end of a pole. Somebody shouted, "Now, aheel!" He swung down full strength on the pole. The rock, giving slightly, dislodged the pole and he fell flat in the water. He came up strangling for a wind his muscles were too paralyzed to draw. He scrubbed the water from his hair and face; he had lost his hat.

"She gave a little," he said, and jammed the pole in better position under the rock.

"Now—aheel!" His feet, so long water-soaked, began to burn. He tried to think of the warm Tennessee hills in which he had roamed with his gun, so comfortable, so free. That was a thousand years ago.

Tom Rowley came back to his father's wagon at four o'clock and changed clothes. The line had moved two miles in five hours and might move another half mile before the gray twilight closed down completely.

The Hunts had stopped by a fire which somebody ahead had built earlier, and when Tom left his wagon Teresa called out to him, "Bring those wet clothes here."

He reached into the wagon and got the clothes and took them to her. She had coffee boiling, and a kettle on the fire with beans and a ham hock simmering in it. Laying the clothes on the edge of the tripod near the fire, she smiled at him. "Where you going now?"

"My turn to stand guard."

She got a plate and a cup and a spoon from the wagon closet and dipped him out a helping of beans. "It'll be cold up there."

She poured him his coffee, and stood against the sheltered side of the wagon to watch him with a pleasant thought expressed in her eyes. "Six months ago, when we started, you were a wild kid."

"I have had a little sense beat into me," he said. "And no doubt will have more." He laid the back of his hand toward the sky and felt the sharp sting of the rain's coldness. "Snow before morning." There were people walking down from the upper canyon—half a dozen men on foot. He watched them come forward and recognized Lane Kerwood.

"Where you going, Lane?"

"For the settlements," said Lane. "We'll make it before you do a hell of a ways."

"Cold walking," said Tom Rowley. He offered no other comment; they could stay or go, live or die—it was their business. But he had his fear for the wagon train. This was the beginning of breakup and if things got worse there would be other people running ahead to escape trouble. They'd be strung out for seventy miles along an entirely strange land and some of them wouldn't make it through. He remembered the expression of care in the captain's eyes, and suddenly understood it. He finished his meal, went back to his wagon to get his gun and climbed the hillside.

FIVE hundred feet up, he turned. The train had disappeared in the rain mists below. The hillside rose directly into a belt of timber, and when he reached this timber he stepped into it. The wind still got at him and coldness crept up his feet. He walked a hundred yards in one direction inside the trees. Retracing his path, he walked a hundred yards in the other direction. When he swung from this last leg of his journey he paused and came to the margin of the timber where, looking along the canyon slope, he saw a buck deer—skinny from winter—standing no more than a hundred feet away, no doubt bound to the creek for water but warned by the soft sounds rising from the wagon train.

The wind was with him. He brought up his gun and, though he had done this a thousand times and scarcely could have missed the target, an urgent sense of caution came to him and caused him to steady the barrel beside a tree. The explosion

made a little clap of rolling thunder along the ravine as the buck dropped.

He walked over, got the buck under its shoulder, and packed it to a sapling tree, hanging it with horns caught in the crotch of the tree's limbs. He dressed it out with his knife and let it bleed for a few minutes, using the time to reload his gun. Then shouldered the buck and started down the hill. Half a dozen men, warned by the shot, came up through the mists searching for him. The train had moved on a little, and Tom walked a quarter mile before he reached his wagon and got a rope and suspended the buck to the wagon box. Then he turned around to find a crowd of thirty men watching him.

He looked closely from face to face, greatly surprised and greatly wondering. They all wore the same look. It was a very close and attentive expression, not unfriendly but not generous. It was thoughtful, it was even a little greedy.

Bill Castro said, "You shot it, Tom. Pick your chunk. We'll divide the rest."

"That's fair," said Tom Rowley. "How'll you divide it?"

"Hungriest first."

He said, "Everybody's hungry. You can't walk up and down this train finding the hungriest. Start here with my wagon and give a chunk to each wagon, up and down the line, till the meat gives out."

He saw them study the deer; they were calculating how far it would reach along the wagon line. It was a slow moment and a long one. He expected opposition from those who saw themselves too far away to receive meat, but Bill Castro said gently, "I guess that's good enough." Nobody spoke against the notion.

"You cut it up," he said to Castro. "I'll take whatever chunk you butcher out first." He stood back, watching Castro go at the carcass, and as he looked around at the crowd an odd, gusty warmth went through him. These were fine people. He took his chunk of meat from Castro and gave it to his mother; then he waited until Castro had laid out a few more pieces in their exact shares, and carried one share to Teresa. "One day less to starve," he

said, and returned up the hill to finish his guard duty.

HE CAME down in full darkness to have his slice of bacon on bread and his coffee. Laying out his canvas bedroll under the wagon, he staked the oxen far up the slope for grass, and returned to crouch beside what was left of the fire.

A pair of riders came down the canyon, running away from trouble. He watched the rain strike and freckle the hot coals and he listened to the train settle down, to the last calling from fire to fire, to the murmuring of people inside their wagons, the strained coughing of his father, and his mother's quiet words. Teresa sat alone before her fire, two wagons away. She had the tarp's shelter above her. Firelight flickered across her face. He walked over and crouched beside her. He worried the half-burnt sticks of wood into the fire's heart. He said, "What's on your mind?"

"How long it will take to put up the first cabin when we get a claim—how big it ought to be. What we can live on till the first crop's up. If there's fish—if there's game."

"If there's game I'll get it," he said.

She was silent a moment. Her face stilled and smoothed with dreaming. "Will you be settling with your people? Or will you roam as you did back home?"

"It was a fine thing to run. I was just as crazy for it as my hounds. Men that have not stood on a ridge listening for daylight to come, waiting for a buck to walk down the run—they don't know. I never thought I'd want to live differently, but good things change, and now the good thing's to settle. I want my land on a good creek. I want flat meadows. But I have got to have some hills nearby. Couldn't live too far from timber."

She said, "I watched you go by the farm, and sometimes I heard your rifle up the ravine. You always came back with meat. It's comfortable to have meat in the smokehouse and a full pantry and the crocks bubbling and potatoes covered down."

He spread his hands before the fire and

its light was brilliant in his eyes as he watched her. His mouth had pressure on it, the pressure of a fine rising excitement. She noticed his attention and held it with a direct but cautious and covered expression. His rashness, so swiftly rising, went only so far and died on doubt. Remembering her place in Tennessee compared with his own, he was still afraid of her. He rose and turned to his bedroll and was at once asleep. Somewhere during the night the sound of rain ceased and he opened his eyes and saw snow falling.

There was a foot of it on the ground by daylight, and still it came on in a waving, whirling smother. He built fire, brought in and yoked the oxen. He had his slice of bread and bacon, and his coffee.

Fear had come with the snow. He felt it around him and he saw it in the trickling stream of people moving down the canyon, on horse and on foot. The train was near to breaking up and, if this thing grew worse, a lot of foolish people would walk straight on to dying. He heard the captain's call come along the canyon and he started upgrade for the meeting.

IN OVERCOAT, muffler and round coonskin hat, the captain stood beside his dying fire with a circle of men around him. The captain seemed a smaller man to Tom than before. His shoulders were rounded, his manner was subdued and his face had depression written upon it.

"It's not wise for people to break away," he said. "This snow won't last."

Ringabaugh said, "It's December. What the hell you mean it won't last?"

"It's not a blizzard country. Now just think. We've sent ahead for food. Inside those wagons, with food, we can stand storm for a month. It won't come to that, but we could if we had to. Keep your people with you. Don't let them go ahead. We made almost two miles yesterday. We'll do better today. The lead wagons will be almost out. Tomorrow we'll be on our way."

Ringabaugh said, "You made a bad guess, coming into this canyon. You're making a bad guess now. I'm for every-

body getting out of here that can get out of here. Cut and run."

Tom Rowley stared at the rankling, irritated Ringabaugh, and he waited for the captain to make an answer which would not only jab through Ringabaugh's side, but would lift up the spirits of the men around him. Cold and a touch of hunger had weakened their usual stiffness.

This canyon pinched them harder each hour and the snow was a growing wall around them. The captain needed to square his shoulders and fill his voice and speak. He was the captain. Tom Rowley waited, aware of his anxiety for the captain to do well.

The captain said, most gently, "I can't vote your minds for you. If men want to walk out, that's their business."

"I'm not talking about that," said Ringabaugh. "I mean pull away with the wagons."

"We can't have wagons trying to pass."

"I'll pass if I take the notion," said Ringabaugh.

"I want a vote on that," said the captain.

"Vote, hell," said Ringabaugh. "Nobody can vote another man's rights."

The crowd was confused, and Ringabaugh's voice was positive. It had a push which the captain's voice lacked. Tom Rowley couldn't let the silence go on.

"First wagons in the line have got to get out of the canyon first, and last wagons last. Otherwise you'll have a jam that powder couldn't blast loose. We're talkin' too much. Let's get down to the front of this line and clear trail."

"I'll pass if I want to," said Ringabaugh, slapping the words against Rowley.

There was a time when Tom Rowley would have raised his fur and laid back his ears, but he had grown a little bit older—very suddenly. He remembered the captain's patience and held his tongue. He turned from the group, walking downgrade with a hand lifted before his face to screen his eyes from the beating snow.

Everybody was on edge, like a band of horses stiffened against strange shadows and ready to bolt. He had never seen fear stand so near the surface of people's faces.

When he passed the Sutters' wagon, he noticed they had closed the canvas opening and were silent inside. That was a bad sign.

THE wagon line moved forward as he continued along the creek; it moved by jolting fits and starts, and gaps between wagons closed up and widened alternately. A steady calling and cursing ran along the column, and single riders rattled by him on the creek stones. Then the line stopped, and a mile down the canyon he found a wagon which, swinging to clear two narrow points standing like gates in the defile, had jammed itself against one of the points.

A group of men worked there, lifting the wagon around by main strength and sending it on. That half hour's delay, Tom thought, might stretch into longer delay if other wagons got into the same trouble here.

He said, "Let's get some shovels and break that damned point down." Seeing a shovel bracketed outside the bed of a passing wagon, he took it without question and climbed the point. Ewing Purvis located a log chunk and began to batter away at the projecting rock, and in a little while there was a crew working on it.

The train moved on with its painful slowness. He counted the wagons as they passed the point, he watched them die out behind the oatmeal wall of snow. His feet burned steadily. Ten men tore the point away foot by foot and the creek turned yellow with the mud falling into it. Rowley steadied himself a moment against a small fir standing on the point's edge. He rammed the shovel into the soil covering and heaved at it, and saw soil and rocks roll away.

Ewing Purvis, in the creek bottom, shouted up, "Watch that, Tom!" Then the ground beneath Tom Rowley broke and he went tumbling downward with the slide and hit the creek forcefully on his hands and knees. A cry came again, and a sharp explosion, and the gritty sound of something falling; he was struck hard on the shoulders and knocked under the

water. He straightened his back and got his head out of the water. He couldn't move his legs. Ewing Purvis jumped into the creek and got an arm under his chest and held him up. Looking around, Tom Rowley saw that the tree had fallen across his legs and wedged them.

"Broken?" shouted Purvis.

"Don't feel a thing."

Men came swarming along the creek and laid hands to the log, rolling it back.

Purvis pulled him up, and he stood on his feet and tried them. "No," he said. "Not broken."

"Well," said Purvis, "that's the end of that point."

A call came up the canyon. "Broken wheel down here!"

Tom Rowley turned that way with the other men. He was wet through again, and shaking.

He returned from the lower canyon in the day's strange twilight, with the snow still densely driven in by an unchanged wind. The hillsides were covered by a rippling white blanket two feet thick and the snow along the margins of the creek was scarred and dirty from all the feet that had tramped down the canyon during the daylight hours. Fifty people that day had left the train and now were floundering somewhere ahead in the darkness of an empty land. Quietness lay inside the wagons. It was not a quietness he liked.

He reached his wagon and changed into dry clothes. He ate his bread and venison and drank his black coffee. He rolled his blankets under the wagon but his feet flamed from their five-day exposure in water, and he had no desire to turn in, cold and weary as he was. The Hunt fire blazed brighter than any other along the line. Teresa stood by it. Walking over to her, he crowded against the heat until his clothes began to scorch.

"Can't soak up enough of this stuff," he said.

She said, "Do you remember the heat and the dust in Wyoming?"

He said, thoughtfully, "When we're inside a house, fed and warm, it's hard to

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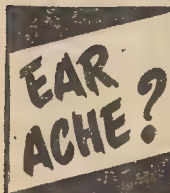


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remember that we've got a mighty thin wall to protect us."

SHE watched him with a steadiness as warm as the fire. She listened and seemed to want to hear him. "We make the fire, Tom. We make the house, and all that's in it. We make our own comfort." She got a cup and poured him coffee from the pot hanging over the blaze.

He said, "Never saw you but what you didn't have something boiling or cooking."

"When there's something bubbling," she said, "everything's all right. I hear a tree fell on you."

He smiled. "Didn't fall hard enough."

"It's an omen. We were born to reach the valley."

He saw the good feeling in her eyes; the closeness came on and his rash instincts rose once more. "Born to do other things, too."

Her silence pulled at him to say more, but he could think of nothing to say. He had gone as far, this one time, as he felt safe in going. She smiled at him, not a whole smile, but a soft and mysterious one that provoked and invited him to guess. She held his eyes, and for a little while camp and wagons and snow fell away. He struggled with his courage—and turned and walked back to his blankets under the wagon.

He was up before daylight. He started his fire and went over to start Teresa's, and saw her coming from the wagon. She was quick, she was sure-moving, filling the coffee pot at the creek, laying on the skillets. She was a woman certain of her chores and of her mind, and for a moment he had a most clear idea of how she would look in a cabin, morning upon morning. He went back to his own breakfast and ate it standing, the wind hard enough to shake him on his feet and the snow thicker than before. He got a shovel from the wagon and started toward the head of the line; this was the touch-and-go day. This was the day to get out, or the day panic would descend upon them.

He recruited his crowd as he went, a

sluggish, sleep-sullen crowd, flinching at the fresh miseries of water and wind and rough rocks on the trail. Half a mile onward Rowley came to the Benson wagon and saw a group around it, bare-headed in the snow-clogged light.

Somebody said, "Benson died." Another half mile brought him to the capsized wagon of Lake Sturdevant, which had been suddenly caught in one of the rocky falls of the creek. The group stopped here and stood a moment in weary reluctance.

"Well," said Tom Rowley, "let's get at the damned thing."

It was an hour's job to pull the wagon up by team and tackle; it was another hour's work to shovel the rock falls into a more shallow roadway. The head of the line moved on; the following wagons came slowly by, slamming down over the flinty break.

Tom Rowley watched closely, and a strange uncomfortable feeling got into him, an apprehension of imminent disaster. A call came up from the bottom of the line, through the snow and slashing wind: "First wagon's out of the canyon!"

He swung back, traveling up the grade with his group straggling after him. He called at the wagons when he passed them, "First wagon's out of the canyon. Watch now—drive easy. We're in the clear. Come on now—slow and sure."

He grew more and more anxious as he talked, and he could not quit listening for trouble. He drew deep for wind as he scrambled along the rocks, and he was irritated at his slow muscles. One by one the wagons appeared through the driving snow and slowly lumbered by him and vanished below. He thought he heard a shout in the higher parts of the canyon, and stiffness went through him. The call came again: "Broken wheel!"

He stopped and swore out his terrible disappointment, and for an instant he gave up hope and didn't care. His feet were in the creek, so cold that the incessant burning had quit. He drew a deep breath and started on. Ten wagons went by him. His father's wagon went by, and Caldwell's,

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and Hunt's. He looked at Teresa on the wagon seat as he passed. That was the last wagon. The moving stream had petered out again. At the bend, at the spot where he had been caught by the log, he saw Connoyer's wagon tilted down on one hub, the tire gone and the spokes crushed.

Connoyer said, "I've got to hunt a spare front wheel, Tom."

"We've used the last one." The wagons behind Connoyer were in Tom Rowley's mind. They made a pressure pushing against Connoyer. It wouldn't take long now for that pressure to break through. Somebody'd bolt. He knew it for dead sure; it was the trouble he had expected all morning. "We've got to push it over, Bill, and keep the road clear."

CONNOYER snapped back his answer angrily: "Don't be so damned loose with other people's wagons. It's mine and I won't have it pushed over."

Tom Rowley heard the slow and nearing rumble of other wagons behind the snow screen. Weight built up against Connoyer's outfit, and there was the answer to all this freedom business. A man was free until he got in the main road and blocked it for others; then he wasn't his own man any more. He looked around at the crowd and he saw they were thinking this same thing. He shook his head at Connoyer. "It's got to be done, Bill. We'll help you unhitch. We'll shift some of your goods over to other wagons when they pass. Then we've got to tip this thing out of the way."

The shouting grew greater in the higher part of the canyon and one wagon, unseen in the snow, came on with a reckless racket. Tom Rowley went by Connoyer's outfit. Suddenly he began to trot through the snow over the rocks. He passed three other wagons and at once saw what he had half expected. Ringabaugh had pulled out from his place higher in the line. Ringabaugh was coming on, he was squeezing by, he was shouting at others to draw aside. Ringabaugh's whip slashed out across the ears of his oxen, and he

cursed as he came, scraping the hubs of the other wagons and bulling his way through. It was exactly the match that could light the powder and turn this canyon into a splintered jam of wagons and teams that a month of praying and sweating couldn't untangle. Ringabaugh saw Tom Rowley. He rolled his whip over Tom's head. "Stay there! Let me alone! I'm going through."

ROWLEY ducked in, avoiding the whip as it whistled by him again. He reached the wagon's front wheel hub and jumped it and went up to the seat. He got his arm around Ringabaugh's neck and hauled him backward. Both of them fell into the creek and a rock gouged Tom Rowley's ribs and he rose straining for breath. Ringabaugh rose with him and swung at him savagely. Tom Rowley stepped aside and plunged against the man. He hit him on the side of the neck and struck him in the belly twice. He saw the man suffering, but he remembered that this was a bull who had to be hurt in order to learn anything. Balancing himself, he stunned Ringabaugh with the best blow he had, landing hard against the man's sulky jaw. Ringabaugh fell back into the creek, sinking under.

Tom Rowley said, "Neil, you drive the damned fool's wagon down to that bend and hold it there. He won't march another foot till his place in line shows up." He bent down and hauled Ringabaugh upright.

Ringabaugh said, "I'll use a gun on you, by God. I'll do what I please."

"Be quiet, you fool, or I'll show you how free it is to get a whipping. You can do what you please when it don't cost too much, but it costs too much now, so shut up."

The line was moving on again, slowly, the wagons rising and falling over the rocks. Tom Rowley listened for the sounds of trouble, for a sharp call to tumble down the canyon. It would come, no doubt, for he knew now that trouble was a steady thing that would always come.

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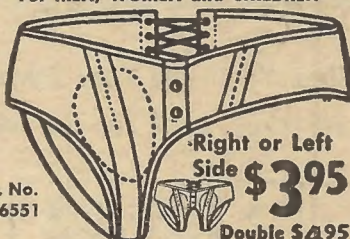
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He came out of the foot of the canyon in the pitch-black night and saw campfires in the meadow ahead of him. The wagons still moved a yard at a time out of the narrow gut, and men were calling across the flats, "Keep going till you clear the road." He stumbled over a rock and stopped to raise his hand against the snow. He saw a fire over to the left, the brightest fire in this camp, and he turned that way, quite certain that it would be Teresa's.

He came up to it and spread his feet, and watched her go to the side box on the wagon. She had something bubbling in the stewpot, and the coffee belched out its fragrant steam. She filled a plate and a cup. She said, "You come under the tarp to eat."

He said, "Well, we're out."

"Why, of course," she said, and smiled at him. Teresa gave him a most direct look. "You eat and go change your clothes. You're a most careless man."

"Careless, no doubt. But I have at least lost some foolishness in that canyon."

"Don't lose it all," she said. "It's nice to have a little left."

He said, "I shall tell you about that, in the valley."

"I'd like to hear it," she said, and stood near him while he ate, smiling at him. There could be no question about it, he thought. That was the girl. He might have a minute of fright when he came to talk about it, but he'd push through it. This was the girl. He knew it. She, in her own way, had said so.

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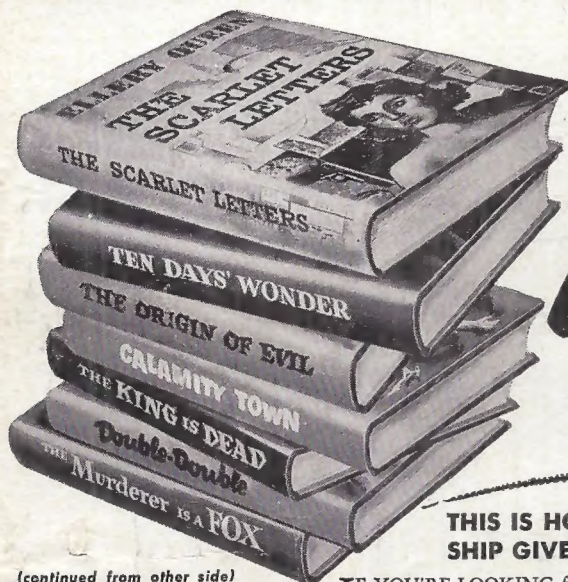
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